

A Prophetic Model of Ministry Viewed Through  
the Work of Flannery O'Connor -- A Lenten Study

by  
Janice L. Seymour

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Janice L. Seymour,

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

*Faculty Committee*

Paul D. Rhoads

[Signature]

\_\_\_\_\_

April 3, 1984  
Date

Janice C. Hough  
Dean

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## ABSTRACT

This project provides a design for a Lenten Study Series. It explores a prophetic model of ministry, relevant to lay-persons as well as clergy, based on the work of Walter Brueggemann. It uses selected excerpts and stories of Flannery O'Connor as tools and guides.

Our time is filled with the lifelessness that comes from the fear of death. As society, a Church, and individuals, we all too often fear the risk of the kind of "seeing" that calls us to life, and a life of faith that acts. In order to control our fear of death, we fragment life into controllable bits and build boxes to contain them so that they can be viewed from one manageable point of view.

This fragmentation and compartmentalization is also at work in the Church. The traditional, stereotypic approach to ministry tends to be hierarchical in nature, and view the clergy person as a "star" who must be skilled as preacher, priest, evangelist, administrator, teacher, counselor, facilitator and prophet. It places the responsibility for ministry on the minister, and fragments ministry, rather than understanding ministry as a total life orientation. This

also tends to drive a wedge between clergy and laity, for it promotes a misplaced sense of power and responsibility on a minister "star"; and allows the laity to abdicate their baptismal birthright and its implicit call to faithful responsibility. Thus, it divests both clergy and laity of power.

This paper offers a prophetic model of ministry as an alternative. It is a holistic process of six study sessions which utilizes cognitive as well as affective means to study, reflect, share and respond. It is a process through which the skills and tools of the prophetic life-style are introduced, explored and, hopefully, deepened.

The study is designed to open up new ways of "seeing" which inform and create a way of being in which clergy and laity, as the Church, may be inspired and empowered to respond as a sacrament to the world -- a sign and expression of God's creativity, love and concern.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM AND ORGANIZATION

The thrust of this project will be to provide a design for a Lenten Study Series that will explore a prophetic model of ministry, relevant to lay persons as well as clergy, using selected excerpts and stories of Flannery O'Connor as tools and guides.

Our time is filled with the lifelessness that comes from the fear of death. As society, a Church, and individuals (clergy and lay persons alike) we all too often fear the risk of the kind of "seeing" that calls us to life, and a life of faith that acts. In order to control our fear of death, we fragment life into controllable bits and build boxes to contain them so that they can be viewed from one manageable point of view. Often society, in order to keep things and people "under control" cuts religion out of the mainstream of our culture, and frequently out of the mainstream of our lives. Religion is tolerated as a "nice" means by which people can be trained in morals, offer service, and experience a certain amount of satisfaction and peace, as long as it "keeps its place" and does not challenge the dominant vision. In other words, it is acceptable for one to be religious, as long as one does not become too visible or too activist. Just as

David and Solomon tried to build the Temple and put God in it in order to serve their own purposes,<sup>1</sup> so society attempts to imprison God in buildings called "churches", today.

If the Church is not a building, but rather the gathered community of the faithful called to minister to one another and the world in Christ's name, this kind of control through fragmentation, compartmentalization and imprisonment is also at work in the Church. Clergy, laity, and even God, have been cut off and imprisoned by a "tunnel vision" that uses tasks, organization, roles and a host of other factors to define the walls that limit our vision of ministry. This process fragments the Body and obscures, limits, and freezes the integrity of true ministry.

The traditional, stereotypic approach to ministry in the churches today tends to be hierarchical in nature, and tends to view the clergy person as a "star" who must be skilled as preacher, priest, evangelist, administrator, teacher, counselor, facilitator and prophet. It also tends to expect that the minister is responsible for assuring that the flock is shepherded in the "right" direction. In this model, ministry is viewed as trying to get the congregation to do some specific task or set of tasks in "the right way", which usually means the minister's way. This tends to place the responsibility for

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 30-1.

ministry on the minister, and to center on, and deal with, various fragments of ministry, rather than understanding ministry as a total life orientation. This approach also tends to drive a wedge between clergy and laity for it promotes a misplaced sense of power and responsibility on a minister "star" (whether he/she wants it or not); and allows the laity to abdicate their baptismal birthright and its implicit call to faithful responsibility. Thus, it divests both clergy and laity of power.

The intent of this paper is to offer a prophetic model of ministry as an alternative. A prophetic model of ministry offers a holistic model based on the opening up of vision which informs and creates a way of being in which clergy and laity, as the Church, are inspired and empowered to respond as a sacrament to the world -- a sign of God's creativity, love and concern. Flannery O'Connor, authoress and modern day prophetess, had the gift of "seeing". She shared that gift through a style of writing that strips the polish and veneer off the walls that domesticate our life experiences. She breaks through them, enabling us and challenging us to see from new and wider perspectives that inform and create a new way of being in the world and responding to it. Her work provides us with many concrete experiences of how a prophet "sees"; and so her work will be used as catalyst, illustration, and beginning point from which to explore the concept of a prophetic model of ministry.

It is hoped that this paper will provide a holistic model through which Christians might be empowered more fully to become the Church, a sacrament to the world, by living life knowing that they will die, and knowing that death is not the victor.

### Organization

This project will be organized as follows:

1. Chapter one will present the plan of the paper.
2. Chapter two will acknowledge some commonly held images of the prophetic, describe Walter Brueggeman's prophetic model of ministry and elaborate on that model.
3. Chapter three will introduce Flannery O'Connor. It will draw largely on her own words, in order to give a feeling for her as a person, through her understanding of, and approach to, writing, her through, her sense of humor and her personal background and struggles.
4. Chapter four will present a design for a six week Lenten Study Series.
5. Chapter five will summarize and offer final conclusions.

### Scope and Limitations

The aim of this project will be to present Walter Bruggeman's prophetic model and elaborate on it; provide

brief introductory information about Flannery O'Connor, her background, and her approach to writing; and design a study series that will use O'Connor's work to inform and illustrate the prophetic model presented, and to provide a basis for thought and study for those who wish to expand their vision.

It will not be concerned with doing a comprehensive study of prophetic models, but will present one possible model, and, using exerpts and/or short stories from the work of Flannery O'Connor, will explore that model from several different perspectives. This project will also not be a comprehensive literary criticism of O'Connor's work. Rather, her work will be used to illustrate the prophetic method, and open up discussions about new ways of seeing and imagery.

## CHAPTER 2

## A PROPHETIC MODEL OF MINISTRY

An Introductory Discussion of Several Images of Prophet

Often, when we are confronted with the idea of 'prophet', one or two images leap to mind. First, there is the image made up of a composite of the several different kinds of Old Testament prophets. For the purpose at hand, it is not necessary or desirable to discuss at length the many issues in historical and literary criticism involved in fully understanding the development of the office of prophet, other than to recognize that the number of different terms and descriptions indicate that there were several different types of prophets with their own style of prophecy.<sup>1</sup>

The first type was that of the dervish - like ecstasies that wandered in bands, and who often went into a trance, showed unusual strength, staggered or danced, stuttered, experienced visions and/or demonstrated other uncontrolled types behavior that were stimulated by dance, drink, music or other means. In other cases it was assumed

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65), II, pp. 6-14, 33-40.

that the Spirit of God had fallen upon them and this "...was in itself regarded as the work of Jahweh."<sup>2</sup> In other cases, after the ecstatic experience the prophet would relate what had happened to those present.<sup>3</sup>

In other cases, although there are ecstatic and visionary experiences involved, prophets also became court advisors, dealt with kings or matters of foreign policy, served as functionaries in wars by inciting the troops to fight, pronouncing curses and judgments, and giving divine sanction to the effort. Some were connected with the sanctuaries; and some were seen as intercessors between God and humanity.<sup>4</sup> There are also the intense images of the prophets dressed in hairshirts or sackcloth and ashes proclaiming, to all who will hear, a message from God of judgment, doom and destruction, and a call to repentance - turning back to God - before it is too late. And, finally, there are the modern images of persecution, imprisonment, torture and a host of other degradations and attacks to human life and dignity that modern 'prophets' and 'prophetesses',

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<sup>2</sup> John H. Hayes, An Introduction to Old Testament Study (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> Hayes, pp. 255-56.

<sup>4</sup> Hayes, pp. 261-66.

such as Berrigan's, Martin Luther King, Mary Daly, Archbishop Romero and thousands of others, bring to mind.

Too often the bits and pieces of these images come together in our minds to form a composite image that is a caricature. This caricature lacks power and meaning because it is a glorification, romanticization, or sentimentalization, that makes the prophet unreal, and unreachable, and therefore powerless to us. We know that we cannot and/or will not envision ourselves as fitting the image.

Walter Brueggeman's Concept of the Prophetic Imagination -- A model for Ministry

There is a need for a new image of prophet that is accessible to each one of us. Walter Brueggeman, in two of his books, In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith,<sup>5</sup> and The Prophetic Imagination, gives us some alternatives. In In Man We Trust he suggests a wisdom model, based on the argument that God has created humanity to be free and responsible, and has allowed humanity to mature and come of age, thus becoming actively responsible participants in creation with him. He develops his argument by exploring the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon. He contends that Saul represents the end of the old age -- the age in which God comes to humanity's rescue and deals with human beings as a God "out

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<sup>5</sup>Walter Brueggeman, In Man We Trust: the Neglected Side of Biblical Faith (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972).

there". During David's reign he sees the monarchy flourish and a whole new understanding of humanity emerge. In David he sees humanity assuming a new responsibility to use talents intelligence, feelings -- total being -- in responding to life. David has faith in his own abilities; he breaks down the wall that places God "out there" by challenging the concept that the sacred is something removed from ordinary life: he serves "sacramental" bread to his soldiers on the march; and he is a king who identifies with the common person and their needs. Although David brought about a new view of humanity's relationship to God, he did not break with the faith of Israel, as evidenced by his moving the ark to the Temple. Solomon, on the other hand, exemplifies the negative aspects of the secularizing effect that David's reign brought about. Solomon was interested only in personal gain. Under his reign people and events were translated into things; and, as a consequence, Solomon lost touch with the people because they had become objects to him. Finally, Brueggeman ties this argument together using the wisdom literature as the culmination of this new found human maturity.

In The Prophetic Imagination, Brueggeman expands his vision, and sets before us a model for ministry based on the prophetic image that is dynamic and holistic and embraces the wisdom image. He begins with the hypothesis that:

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception of the dominant

culture around us. Thus I suggest that prophetic ministry has to do not primarily with addressing specific public crises but with addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated.

. . . The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness . . . On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move. . .<sup>6</sup>

For Brueggeman, criticism and energizing must go together because taken individually they go against our faith tradition which understands that ". . . It is precisely the dialectic of criticizing and energizing which can let us be seriously faithful to God."<sup>7</sup>

Brueggeman sees that ministry in the Church today has become fragmented and thus has lost its real purpose and power. He sees the prophetic image as an image that will bring wholeness and energy to ministry. He says,

It is a measure of our enculturation that the various acts of ministry (for example, counseling, administration, even liturgy) have taken on lives and functions of their own rather than being seen as elements of the one prophetic ministry of formation and reformation of alternative community.<sup>8</sup>

Although he is speaking of the ordained ministry in this instance I believe that this prophetic image is a viable one for

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggeman, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 14.

any Christian. It also provides a basis for a team approach to ministry which empowers and activates clergy and laity alike.

For Brueggeman, the key image in this prophetic model of ministry is Moses. Moses led the Hebrews to a break with "the religion of static triumphalism and the politics of oppression and exploitation", that led the people to despair. He replaces the claims of power of the gods of Egypt, which are enslaved by the social reality imposed by Pharaoh, who uses them for his own purposes, with "the alternative religion of the freedom of God." When God becomes free, God is answerable only to God, and therefore is free to hear the cries of the oppression. Thus ". . . Moses dismantles the politics of oppression and exploitation by countering it with a politics of justice and compassion."<sup>9</sup> For Brueggeman,

. . . there is no freedom of God without the politics of justice and compassion, and there is no politics of justice and compassion without a religion of the freedom of God.<sup>10</sup>

This alternative consciousness brought by Moses is brought through criticizing and energizing. This energizing is closely linked to hope. Society, then as now, did not believe in true newness, but simply rearranged parts into new patterns. Hope energizes because, "We are energized not by

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<sup>9</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 18.

that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given."<sup>11</sup> This energizing process has three dimensions in the prophetic model. They are: 1) the embrace of the darkness and the painful, for the God who can be trusted with the dark and painful can be trusted with the light; 2) the concept that God is free and he chooses to be for us; and 3) the element of doxology in which, ". . . the singers focus on this free One and in an act of the song appropriate the freedom of God as their own freedom."<sup>12</sup>

This revolutionary consciousness brought by Moses continued until 1000 B.C. At this point Brueggeman reverses his view of David as a positive new force. He sees him instead as the beginning of the reversal from Moses' dynamic radical consciousness back to the dead, static consciousness of the monarchy in which God is no longer free and mobile, but confined in the Temple at the beck and call of the King. Thus he sees David as supporting the static oppressive social structure which culminates in Solomon's reign. (This new interpretation has its merit. It does not negate the positive concept of the wisdom approach, but embraces it.) Solomon and his royal consciousness, brings down Moses' alternative consciousness -- his counter-culture -- by countering the economics of equality

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<sup>11</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 25.

with the economics of affluence; he countered the politics of justice with the politics of oppression; and, he countered the religion of God's freedom with the religion of God's accessibility.<sup>13</sup> Solomon's method of silencing opposition, as is with any absolute authority, was either to prohibit it with force, or to simply ignore it.<sup>14</sup>

The royal consciousness is alive and well in any age, including our own. Brueggeman puts forth the prophetic paradigm of Moses as the dynamic growing edge of possibility and justice. The vocation of the prophet is,

to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.<sup>15</sup>

He observes that,

The royal consciousness leads people to numbness, especially to numbness about death. It is the task of the prophetic ministry and imagination to bring people to engage their experience of suffering to death.<sup>16</sup>

There are three parts to this prophetic task:

1. To offer symbols that are adequate to the horror and masiveness of the experience which evokes numbness and requires denial.....
2. To bring to public expression those very fears and terrors that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we do not know they are there.....

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<sup>13</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, pp. 36-7.

<sup>14</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, pp. 37-8.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 46.

3. To speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us, and to speak neither in rage nor in cheap grace, but with the candor born of anguish and passion.....<sup>17</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

Brueggeman's concept of the prophetic imagination suggests two things. First, this is a way of life that I have come to experience as that of the artist. Being an artist is a very special calling, and those who are called to be professional writers, painters, actors, sculptors, speakers, musicians, and others, are especially gifted at seeing and expressing the alternative consciousness in new, living symbols. Some of the ways that these artists speak to us prophetically are by:

1. taking a detail and reshaping and redefining the general thereby reshaping the emotional response;
2. taking the ordinary and making it an event;
3. transforming the normal or ordinary by using an element that is foreign to it;
4. using horror or the grotesque;
5. pushing past the boundary of the expected to something new;
6. presenting too much, so that we can't handle the input normally and must look in a new way;
7. seeing from several perspectives at the same time.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, Prophetic, pp. 49-50.

<sup>18</sup> Class notes from Jon Hart Olson, "New Icons for the Word", School of Theology at Claremont, January 31, 1980.

The second aspect of this concept of the prophetic imagination is that this way of life is a way of "seeing". It is a way of approaching and living life that can be learned and practiced by any person, minister or lay person, adult or child. It is a way in which every person can begin to see life as sacramental. I believe that we are called to this way of seeing and living through our Baptism. This way of life is one in which there is no room for hierarchy, or "stars", or fragmentation. It is a way of being that is holistic. Therefore, we must continually challenge ourselves to "see" in ever new ways, and study, support and become involved with those who have been called to challenge our thinking and our way of being through the arts.

## CHAPTER 3

## FLANNERY O'CONNOR - AN INTRODUCTION TO HER AND HER WORK

A Brief Biographical Statement

Flannery O'Connor began her writing career as a shy country-girl from a small town in Georgia called Milledgeville. She began publishing before she finished her M.A. at the University of Iowa. By 1956 she was known, as Robert Fitzgerald put it, as a 'woman of letters'.<sup>1</sup> It was during that year that her first book, Wise Blood, was translated into French and she won the first place prize in the O. Henry short story collection as she was to do again in 1963 shortly before her death. She collected and raised birds as a hobby and took special pleasure in her flock of peafowl, several of which were named Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Bean. She spent the last fifteen years of her life battling lupus, a disease in which the body forms antibodies that attack its own tissues. She died in July of 1964 at the age of 39.

Flannery O'Connor was a devout Catholic and her faith and understanding of theology were reflected in her own life

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, Everything that Rises Must Converge (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956), p. xxii.

style. She was a person of great courage with a firm grip on reality. In a letter to her friend, Robert Lowell, she said

I am making out fine in spite of any conflicting stories... I have enough energy to write with and as that is all I have any business doing anyhow, I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing. What you have to measure out, you come to observe more closely, or so I tell myself.<sup>2</sup>

Sally Fitzgerald, close friend and editor of O'Connor's letters and papers observes

If she had a long struggle accepting loneliness, and the reality of a permanently curtailed life, or if she felt resentment or self-pity (and how could she have failed to suffer these, and much more, to some degree?), she gave no sign of such feeling to any of us.<sup>3</sup>

Flannery O'Connor took great delight in watching people and commenting on the human condition. She had a great sense of humor and was able to see the comic in everyday human behavior. Sally Fitzgerald says of her:

The world of the absurd delighted her. She regaled us with Hadacol advertisements; birth announcements of infants with names that had to be read to be believed: such news items as the attendance of Roy Rogers' horse at a church service in California, or the award of first prize in an amateur contest to a crimped and beribboned seven-year-old singing 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'; and the wonderful mugs of a gospel quartet promised as a Coming Attraction somewhere. All these things filled her with glee, and gleefully she passed them on.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979), p. xvl. Permission to quote this source granted by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

<sup>3</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. xvl.

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. xiii.

Many of the people and events she encountered in advertisement, newspapers and everyday trips to the doctor's office, the hospital, downtown Milledgeville or the farm became characters in her stories.

Sally Fitzgerald sums up Flannery O'Connor with this statement

There she stands, to me, a phoenix risen from her own words: calm, slow, funny, courteous, both modest and very sure of herself, intense, sharply penetrating, devout but never pietistic, downright, occasionally fierce, and honest in a way that restores honor to the word.

#### Understanding of and Approach to Writing

Flannery O'Connor spent part of her time, the last few years of her life lecturing at various colleges, universities and groups on her understanding of and approach to writing. She was a master of language and recognized and it in herself. Therefore, in order to capture a feeling for her as a person, and as a writer, I would like to, for the most part, let her speak for herself on several key issues in this section.

#### As a Catholic Writer

Flannery O'Connor was deeply religious, a devout Catholic, and described herself as a Catholic writer. She understood her task as expressing the awesome mystery of faith while

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<sup>5</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. xii.

seeing clearly all the evil, horror, and pain that humanity and the world has to offer. She said of her task.

...my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.<sup>6</sup>

The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for.

It seems to me to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it. This may explain the lack of bitterness in the stories.<sup>8</sup>

The Catholic fiction writer is entirely free to observe. He feels no call to take on the duties of God or to create a new universe. He feels perfectly free to look at the one we already have and to show exactly what he sees. He feels no need to apologize for the ways of God to man nor to avoid looking at the ways of man to God. For him, to "tidy up reality" is certainly to succumb to the sin of pride.<sup>9</sup>

If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased. To look at the worst will be for him no more than an act of trust in God.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1969), p. 113. Permission to quote this source granted by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

<sup>7</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 90.

<sup>9</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 148.

### The Fiction Writer and 'Seeing'

Flannery O'Connor speaks of the fiction writer as one with prophetic vision. This prophetic vision is moralistic but realistic. It takes its time and looks deeply until it sees the whole reflected both in the enormous and the minute. By empowering us to see and experience fully and in depth every aspect of life, prophetic vision pushes us beyond despair and a life of "the living dead", to hope and newness of life.

The fiction writer should be characterized by his kind of vision. His kind of vision is prophetic vision. Prophecy, which is dependent on the imaginative and not the moral faculty, need not be a matter of predicting the future. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism that does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of seeing is finding the whole reflected in the minute

...there's a certain grain of stupidity that the writer of fiction can hardly do without, and this is the quality of having to stare, of not getting the point at once. The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it; and it's well to remember that the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene. For him, the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima affects life on the Oconee River, and there's not anything he can do about it.<sup>12</sup>

This kind of seeing pierces through the ordinary, surface experience to the awe-full and the mysterious.

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<sup>11</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 77.

...if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations/ have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability. He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves--whether they know clearly what it is they act upon or not.<sup>13</sup>

And this kind of seeing hopes.

People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them. They don't take long looks at anything, because they lack the courage. The way to despair is to refuse to have any kind of experience, and the novel, of course, is a way to have experience.<sup>14</sup>

### The Fiction Writer and Proclamation

Telling the Truth. For Flannery O'Connor, the role of the fiction writer is first to see, and then to tell the truth in such a way that the deaf hear and the blind see. In a letter to a friend Flannery O'Connor says that there is a distinction between seeing and proclaiming.

...St. T. (Thomas Aquinas) says that prophetic vision is dependent on the imagination of the prophet, not his moral life; and that there is a distinction that must be made between having prophetic vision and the proclamation of the same.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, pp. 41-2.

<sup>14</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 367.

Flannery O'Connor was a seer. She saw our age as

...an age of searchers and discoverers, and at worst, an age that has<sup>16</sup> domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily.

She describes the Christian artist's role as honestly reflecting this domesticated despair.

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience...to the hard of hearing you shout, and<sup>17</sup> for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.

In a letter to a friend she says, "As Robert (Fitzgerald) says, it is the business of the artist to uncover the strangeness of truth".<sup>18</sup> She said

The type of mind that can understand good fiction is... the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality,<sup>19</sup> and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery.

Flannery O'Connor was not only a seer. Her greatest gift was a proclaimer of the truth--the artist that drew in 'large and startling figures'. For her, in order to overcome 'domesticated despair' and be open to mystery and truth the artist must root out the distortions of reality by recognizing and reflecting the truth down to the worst of it.

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<sup>16</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, pp. 33-4.

<sup>18</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 343.

<sup>19</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 79.

'Today's reader, if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift. This reader's favorite word is compassion. I don't wish to defame the word. There is a better sense in which it can be used but seldom is -- the sense of being in travail with and for creation in its subjection to vanity. This is a sense which implies a recognition of sin; this is suffering - with, but one which blunts no edges and makes no excuses. When infused into novels, it is often forbidding. Our age doesn't go for it.'<sup>20</sup>

This means, first, stripping away sentimentality, romanticism and pornography.

--We lost our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite. Pornography, on the other hand, is essentially sentimental, for it leaves out the connection of sex with its meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake.<sup>21</sup>

Second, it requires recognizing evil as evil without excuses or equivocations.

To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit who must be made to name himself. And not simply to name himself as vague evil, but to name himself with his specific personality for every occasion.<sup>22</sup>

And finally, it means being objective enough about our relationship with God to be able to overcome our fake pride and find the humor in our humanness.

The Christian novelist is distinguished from his pagan

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<sup>20</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 166.

<sup>21</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 148.

<sup>22</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 117.

colleagues by recognizing sin as sin. According to his heritage he sees it not as sickness or an accident of environment, but as a responsible choice of offense against God which involves his eternal future. Either one is serious about salvation or one is not. And it is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe. One reason a great deal of our contemporary fiction is humorless is because so many of these writers are relativists and have to be continually justifying the actions of their characters on a sliding scale of values.<sup>23</sup>

Seeing the truth without excuses, evil and all, stripped of sentimentality, romanticism, and pornography, frees us to see the humor in our humanness. When we are able to laugh at our humanness we are released from the fallacy that we can somehow save ourselves and we are able to freely claim the grace God gives us.

The Tools of Violence, the Grotesque, and the Freak.

The brutally honest way with which O'Connor portrays reality has been criticized by some for being violent and grotesque. But violence and the grotesque are tools that the artist/writer uses to draw large and startling pictures in order to tell the truth. She felt that,

Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good

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<sup>23</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, pp. 167-8.

have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing-down that will soften their real look.<sup>24</sup>

It is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life; and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost. Fiction, made according to its own laws, is an antidote to such a tendency, for it renews our knowledge that we live in the mystery from which we draw our abstractions.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, she is saying that when we confine the practice of spiritual things to the church on Sunday or to certain events in life but not all of them, we will eventually have nothing of the power and mystery of faith left. But the artist through the shoutings and the 'large and startling figures' of his/her work can help us to see and to hear the mysterious and the supernatural.

O'Connor uses violence, the grotesque, and the freak to shout and to 'draw in large and startling figures.' She saw the grotesque and the freakish as mirrors that reflect to us who we are

The novelist can no longer reflect a balance from the world he sees around him; instead, he has to try to create one. It is the way of drama that with stroke the writer has both to mirror and to judge. When such a writer has a freak for his hero, he is not simply showing us what we are, but what we have become. His prophet-freak is an image of himself.<sup>26</sup>

And, she says, the writer of grotesque fiction is

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<sup>24</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 226.

<sup>25</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, pp. 151-2.

<sup>26</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 118.

...looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly,<sup>27</sup> just as real to him, really, as the one everybody sees.

...grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity. I believe that they come about from the prophetic vision....In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism<sup>28</sup> that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque.

In other words, through the use of the grotesque and the freakish, the artist-writer shocks and surprises us, piercing through the surface distortions forming a bridge into new layers of dimension and depth of reality.

Violence is another tool with which the artist-writer reaches out, grabs our attention, and brings us to one of those moments, perhaps a split second, when we are face to face with the experience of truth. Flannery O'Connor speaks of her use of violence,

With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially, and I believe these are times when writers are more interested in what we are essentially than in the tenor of our daily lives. Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven. But regardless of what can be taken by it, the man in the violent situation reveals those quali-

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<sup>27</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 44.

ties which are all he will have to take into eternity with him; and since the characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity,<sup>29</sup> it is appropriate to think of what they take with them.

...violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads<sup>30</sup> are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work.

She uses violence and the grotesque to open our eyes and to say, 'It may be too late for this character in my story, but now you can see-it's not too late for you!

The Moment of Grace. Even though, often, we the readers and we the faithful need to be shouted at in order to gain our attention and be empowered to hear, and give large and startling figures in order to see, Flannery O'Connor also sees a hunger in us.

...There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what is forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration.<sup>31</sup>

The unexpected in her stories -- the violent, the grotesque, and the freakish--often become instruments of grace. They grab our attention and bring us to that experience on the edge of reality, that decision point, where we can choose to accept or reject the gift of grace God offers us. She said,

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<sup>29</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, pp. 113-14.

<sup>30</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 48.

There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected,<sup>32</sup> even though the reader may not recognize this moment.

She says the thing that makes a story work is

...an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable, and I have found that, for me, this is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered. And frequently it is an action in which the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace.<sup>33</sup>

Jesus' stories and parables shocked his listeners.

Because we have heard the stories so many times, too often they have become comfortable to us. Because some of the things Jesus uses for illustrations are not familiar to us in our culture, we often fail to see the shocking realities that he presented to us. Flannery O'Connor brings back to us the shocking reality of Jesus' stories. She has the gift of taking our everyday experiences, stripping off all the polish and veneer that we use to 'domesticate' them and make them comfortable and then she presents them to us in their simple and terrifyingly honest reality -- terrifying because as we see ourselves standing before her mirror in all our nakedness we realize how helpless we are, and how dependent we are on God's grace.

Prophecy is a matter of seeing, not saying, and is certainly the most terrible vocation. My prophet will be inarticulate and burnt<sup>34</sup> by his own visions. He'll have to explode somewhere.

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<sup>32</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 118.

<sup>33</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 118.

<sup>34</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 372.

Flannery O'Connor as Prophet

If the church is to be open to the presence of God in Christ now, it has to live a life of imagination. This is to say that imagination is not a 'faculty' in man, but a posture of the whole man toward his experience.<sup>35</sup>

Imagination and the imaginative process is the key to understanding the vocation of the prophet. Poet, theologian Rubem A. Alves speaks of imagination as magic. He sees it as a means to wholeness that grows out of impotence. He says that when human needs and inspires are repressed or denied by the dominate order then, out of necessity, our consciousness creates magic in order to preserve itself and remain whole.<sup>36</sup> He sees the need for what he calls sorcerers who have power to name things.<sup>37</sup>

Urban T. Holmes III, speaks of Ornstein's research into the function of the brain, and the distinction between right and left brain fuctions. In light of this research he sees imagination as that which bridges our affective and cognitive sides and brings us to wholeness. He says ".... to be wholly human one exercises one's entire brain. Man images

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<sup>35</sup> Urban, T. Holmes III, Ministry and Imagination (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> Rubem A. Alves, Tomorrow's Child Imagination Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Rubem M. Alves, Lecture at the School of Theology at Claremont Ministers Convocation, November 7, 1983.

and, in so doing, becomes aware of the presence of God in his life."<sup>38</sup>

Walter Brueggeman sees the vocation of the prophet as one of keeping imagination alive through a three-fold process of criticism, energizing, and doxology. Criticism, in this sense, is not the destructive, paralyzing, guilt producing, complaining that often passes for criticism. Criticism is a process of 'seeing' rather than merely 'looking'. Flannery O'Connor describes this process of 'seeing' in this way:

The novelist writes about what he sees on the surface, but his angle of vision is such that he begins to see before he gets to the surface and he continues to see after he has gone past it. He begins to see in the depths of himself, and it seems to me that his position there rests on what must certainly be the bedrock of all human experience <sup>39</sup> the experience of limitation or, if you will, of poverty.

She says the bedrock of this kind of 'seeing' is poverty. By this she means the awareness of human limitation, and, therefore for her, a call to faith.

The role of the prophet for Brueggeman, and the role of the writer for O'Connor are the same. It is to pierce the numbness through which we deny the frustration, grief, anger and despair that paralyze us. It is cutting through to the heart of things, 'seeing' the ideas, myths, rationalizations, deceptions and illusions that create and sustain the structure

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<sup>38</sup> Holmes, p. 93.

<sup>39</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 132.

of reality, or story, of a people. It is seeing and exposing those things that maintain what Brueggeman calls the 'royal consciousness'.

Prophetic criticism means embracing the darkness and the pain, and reflecting it to the people and publicly expressing it through symbols that reflect all the horror and the massiveness of it, without the rage or cheap grace of which Brueggeman speaks. But it must be born out of anguish and compassion. For Flannery O'Connor, "... the roots of the eye are in the heart."<sup>40</sup> She said, "... you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it."<sup>41</sup> Without this kind of truth, God becomes an idol imprisoned in our Temple-like boxes, and we remain paralyzed in domesticated fear and despair.

Flannery O'Connor's work definitely has a cutting edge. Most people who read her work for the first time wonder why it is so morbid. They have been captured and drawn into her stories where grotesque characters, violence, horror, irony and shock endings bring them to the bedrock experience of poverty, or human limitation. Often the reader is left standing on the cutting edge with the question that seems to say, "You've seen the truth. Will you change before it is too late?"

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<sup>40</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 144.

<sup>41</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 90.

Unfortunately many people never get past the feeling that O'Connor's work is morbid and depressing. They miss the humor in it -- the saving grace that enables and empowers us to laugh at ourselves. The grace that frees us from taking ourselves too seriously on the one hand, and not seriously enough on the other. The grace through which we see the free God that hears our cries of despair, embraces us in our darkness and brings us hope for the future.

This is the energizing process about which Brueggeman speaks. For him, the prophet must mine the memory of the people to find symbols that are not general or universal, but that have grown out of their experience, and that adequately contradict despair, thereby shaping a new way of seeing that offers hope for the future.<sup>42</sup> Theologian Paul Tillich believes that the only way we can speak about God is through symbols.

He says:

Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate.<sup>43</sup>

Symbol . . . not only opens up dimensions and elements of reality which otherwise would remain unapproachable but also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Walter Brueggeman, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 66.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Tillich, The Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> Tillich, p. 42.

For Brueggeman, the point behind symbolizing hope is

. . . to return the community to its single referent, the sovereign faithfulness of God. It is only that return which<sup>45</sup> enables a rejection of the closed world of royal definition.

Flannery O'Connor took her faith seriously. She described herself as a Catholic writer. Clearly, the creation of symbols of hope that bring the people to an encounter with God, is the intent of her work. She approached the prophetic task by creating parabolic symbols. Although her short stories may not fall under the strict definition of parable, they are certainly parabolic in nature. Therefore, it may be helpful to discuss briefly the nature of the parable.

Sallie McFague describes New Testament parables as " . . . linguistic incarnations . . ."<sup>46</sup> she says,

. . . all genuine parables, are themselves actuality -- the parables are a figurative representation of an actual total<sup>47</sup> meaning, so they do not 'stand for' anything but are life.

The spectators must participate imaginatively, must so live in the story that insight into its strangeness and novelty come home to them. They are not told about the graciousness of God in a parable but are shown a situation<sup>48</sup> of ordinary life which has been revolutionized by grace.

What she is suggesting is that parables are not like allegories that can be dissected and interpreted. They are not information

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<sup>45</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 68.

<sup>46</sup> Sally McFague, Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> McFague, p. 67.

<sup>48</sup> McFague, p. 71.

to be understood as facts and stored in our memories as beliefs or knowledge, but are experiences to be lived. They create a world to live in. They are what Dominic Crossan calls, "story events".<sup>49</sup> This understanding is also apparent in philosopher Suzanne Langer's description of the task of the writer when she says:

The poet's business is to create the appearance of "experiences," the semblance of events lived and felt, and to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of virtual life.<sup>50</sup>

Since parables create a world to be experienced, they cannot be understood only from within their own world.<sup>51</sup> Each of us has our own story that we live out. It is a growing, changing thing. The power of the parabolic story is that it has a movement through a time and history of its own, and therefore, a good one captures us and involves us in a story different from our own. It causes us to give up control for awhile, and brings the opportunity to see the possibility of a different context for our own life.<sup>52</sup> And, after seeing from a new perspective, we are confronted with the decision

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<sup>49</sup> John Dominic Crossan, The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story (Allen: Argus Communications, 1975), p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> Suzanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> John Dominic Crossan, In Parables: The Challenge of Historical Jesus (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. xiv.

<sup>52</sup> McFague, p. 79.

to claim the new life or reject it. In other words, the parabolic story is concerned with becoming. It captures us and draws us into a new world -- a new incarnation -- and presents us with the possibility of confronting and experiencing the Kingdom of God first hand, rather than simply thinking about it. It brings us to the possibility of conversion.<sup>53</sup>

How does the parabolic story bring the reader to possibility and decision? For McFague, parables have two key aspects from which they gain their power: realism and strangeness.<sup>54</sup> Crossan puts it this way:

The surface function of parable is to create contradiction within a given situation of complacent security but, even more unnervingly, to challenge the fundamental principle of reconciliation by making us aware of the fact that we made up the reconciliation.<sup>55</sup>

He says, "Parable brings not peace but the sword, and parable casts fire upon the earth which receives it."<sup>56</sup>

Suzanne Langer says that, ". . . art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling."<sup>57</sup> The parabolic story does this by coming to meet our experience with the familiar. It uses everyday language and everyday situations in such a way

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<sup>53</sup> McFague, p. 84.

<sup>54</sup> McFague, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> Crossan, Dark, p. 57.

<sup>56</sup> Crossan, Dark, p. 55.

<sup>57</sup> Langer, p. 40.

that we are able to see part of our own story in it, and therefore draws us into it.<sup>58</sup> But just when we begin to get comfortable, that familiar, everyday world is tipped on its edge.

Brueggeman suggests that this is done through the use of what he calls hope-filled language -- language that is awe-full and wonder-full. He calls this the language of amazement.<sup>59</sup> The language of amazement exposes the despair and hopelessness first by ridiculing the reality of the 'royal consciousness' and then by inverting it -- turning it upside-down -- transforming it.<sup>60</sup>

"Inversions may begin in a change of language, a redefined perceptual field, or an altered consciousness."<sup>61</sup> The parabolic story draws us into a familiar and comfortable world and then, all of a sudden, the world shifts, things still look familiar, but they are no longer the same. Our vision and our experience are altered. We find ourselves living in a different world. If the story is true it gives us a new vision of or uncovers the way to God's reality for our lives and brings us the skills

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<sup>58</sup> Stanley Hauerwas with Richard Bondi and David B. Burrell, Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 71-2.

<sup>59</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 70.

<sup>60</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 75.

<sup>61</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, p. 75.

to step back from our self deceptions, be truthful with ourselves, and continue our spiritual journey.<sup>62</sup> We have been brought to the edge of conversion.

This is the process that Brueggeman calls doxology. It is the process of finding or creating new images that challenge hopelessness and despair by presenting our reality to us from a new perspective. Alves describes this process saying,

We imitate the shape of hope. We attempt to give birth to it, to make it incarnate, to transform the absent into the present.<sup>63</sup>

This process of doxology does not take us out of reality, but rather, drives us into it more deeply. The world remains the same, we simply see it anew from a perspective of greater truthfulness and or depth. Brueggeman says,

The hope-filled language of prophecy, in cutting through the royal despair and hopelessness, is the language of amazement. It is a language that engages the community in new discernments and celebrations just when it had nearly given up and had nothing to celebrate. The language of amazement is against the despair just as the language of grief is against the numbness. I believe that rightly embraced there is no more subversive or prophetic idiom than the practice of doxology which sets us before the reality of God, of God right at the center of a scene from which we presumed he had fled.<sup>64</sup>

The power behind Flannery O'Connor's short stories is that she creates her 'virtual' worlds in such a way that they

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<sup>62</sup> Hauerwas, p. 80.

<sup>63</sup> Alves, Tomorrow's, p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> Brueggeman, Prophetic, pp. 69-70.

feel natural and familiar. She draws us in deeply. She gains our trust and our confidence. If we have any reservations she overcomes them with her down-to-earth people and places. She uses idiomatic language to draw us into her worlds. In a few brief words or paragraphs she transforms her experiences of real people she met in the doctor's office, in the hospital, or around town into characters who are so familiar that we can not help but recognize ourselves, someone we know, or someone we have known.

But once she has gained our trust and confidence she draws us deeper into her 'virtual' world. The down-to-earth realness that felt familiar, and that draws us into her world, pulls us deeper until it is too late to turn back -- we have no choice but to live through it. We begin to see the world with all the dirt, grime, injustice, violence, awesomeness, paradox, conflict, wonder, uncertainty, ambiguity -- all those experiences that life presents us with, but without the walls and veneer with which we try to distance ourselves from them, and domesticate them.

In the process, she names us as the finite flesh, blood and bone people that we human beings are. Her worlds and her characters strip away all the rationalizations, and sentimentalizing that we use to try and protect ourselves from truly experiencing the real heights and depths of suffering, pain and despair; love and hope; what it means to be alive -- what

it means to be finite human beings. She names us, and in so doing, tells the human story as one that is personal -- one that any person can recognize and identify with.

She doesn't stop there, however, for Flannery O'Connor is a prophet. She does not simply open our eyes to the world as it is, she transforms it in order that we see the world with new depth. She says,

Much of my fiction takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable, though the reasonableness of my use of it may not always be apparent. The assumptions that underlie this use of it, however, are those of the central Christian mysteries.<sup>65</sup>

St. Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on his lesser level, hopes to do.<sup>66</sup>

We see this as she catches us up and immerses us in her 'larger than life' world, and our seeing is sharpened so that we begin to believe that we glimpse the 'real' shape of existence. But then, she begins to needle our growing comfort and confidence, and our pride in the idea that we have 'seen the light'. Out of the depths of this 'larger than life' world begins to immerse characters and events that are puzzling, unsettling, shocking and even frightening.

Her heroes, her prophets of the truth, very often are grotesque, freakish. Her seemingly normal, ordinary, everyday

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<sup>65</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 109.

<sup>66</sup> O'Connor, Mystery, p. 184.

people whose lives are neat, orderly and controlled, become those that stand between truth, and the hero and reader. Ordinary, everyday people, doing ordinary, reasonable acts, react to the truth presented by the freakish prophets. Their reactions, efforts to regain control and maintain their lives and their world, precipitate events that turn the world upside-down. They, and we, are brought to the edge of conversion. Of this experience she writes:

. . . I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasing annihilating light, a blast that will last a life time.<sup>67</sup>

Flannery O'Connor brings us to the edge of conversion and challenges us to repent -- that is, turn our lives in a new direction; to turn our lives toward the awesome wonder and truth of the "central Christian mysteries." She is indeed a prophetic writer.

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<sup>67</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 427.

## CHAPTER 4

## LENTEN STUDY SERIES

Define the Purpose and Approach of the Study.

Our time is filled with the lifelessness that comes from the fear of death. As society, a Church, and individuals (clergy and lay persons alike) we all too often fear the risk of the kind of "seeing" that calls us to life, and a life of faith that acts. In order to control our fear of death, we fragment life into controllable bits and build boxes to contain them so that they can be viewed from one manageable point of view. Often society, in order to keep things and people "under control" cuts religion out of the mainstream of our culture, and frequently, out of the mainstream of our lives. Religion is tolerated as a nice means by which people can be trained in morals, offer service, and experience a certain amount of satisfaction and peace, as long as it "keeps its place" and does not challenge the dominant vision. In other words, it is acceptable for one to be religious, as long as one does not become too visible or too activist. Just as David and Solomon built the temple and put God in it in order to serve their own purposes,<sup>1</sup> so society attempts to imprison God in buildings called "churches", today.

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 30-1.

If the Church is not a building, but rather the gathered community of the faithful called to minister to one another and the world in Christ's name, this kind of control through fragmentation, compartmentalization and imprisonment is also at work in the Church. Clergy, laity, and even God, have been cut off and imprisoned by a "tunnel vision" that uses tasks, organization, roles and a host of other factors to define the walls that limit our vision of ministry. This process fragments the Body and obscures, limits, and freezes the integrity of true ministry.

The traditional, stereotypic approach to ministry in the churches today tends to be hierarchial in nature, and tends to view the clergy person as a "star" who must be skilled as preacher, priest, evangelist, administrator, teacher, counselor, facilitator and prophet. It also tends to expect that the minister is responsible for assuring that the flock is shepherded in the "right" direction. In this model, ministry is viewed as trying to get the congregation to do some specific task or set of tasks in "the right way", which usually means the minister's way. This tends to place the responsibility for ministry on the minister, and to center on and deal with various fragments of ministry, rather than understanding ministry as a total life orientation. This approach also tends to drive a wedge between clergy and laity for it promotes a misplaced sense of power and responsibility on a

minister "star" (whether he/she wants it or not); and allows the laity to abdicate their baptismal birthright and its implicit call to faithful responsibility. Thus it divests both clergy and laity of power.

The intent of the study is to offer a prophetic model of ministry as an alternative. A prophetic model of ministry offers a holistic model based on the opening up of vision which informs and creates a way of being in which clergy and laity, as the Church, are inspired and empowered to respond as a sacrament to the world--a sign of God's creativity, love and concern. Flannery O'Connor, authoress and modern day prophetess, and that gift of "seeing". She shared the gift through a style of writing that strips the polish and veneer off the walls that domesticate our life experiences, and breaks through them enabling us and challenging us to see from new and wider perspectives that inform and create a new way of being in the world and responding to it. Her work provides us with many concrete experiences of how a prophet "sees". It is a catalyst, illustration, and beginning point from which we will explore a prophetic model of ministry that each one of us is called to take up.

Hopefully, the study will provide an opportunity to experience a holistic model of prophetic ministry through which those who participate might be empowered more fully to live life knowing that they will die, and knowing that

death is not the victor, and therefore able to more fully become the Church -- a sacrament to the world.

Define the Growth/Sharing Group Model.

There are many models of learning. Most studies of this type use the lecture/discussion model in which a leader presents the material and invites discussion on certain questions. A Growth/Sharing model will be used in this study.

The Growth/Sharing model used in this study is one that has grown out of, and built upon true experiences. The first was, graduate study in the area of art education.<sup>2</sup> The second was experience working with a retreat organization creating and leading retreats for children, youth and adults. This Growth/Sharing model is a means of exploring Scripture, other material from our Christian tradition, and the prophets of truth from across the ages including the artist/prophets such as Flannery O'Connor, of our time. It is also a means of encountering and dialoguing with the message, ourselves, others and God. In this model a variety of methods of experiencing, reflecting and the sharing of reflections will be used for a more holistic approach. The aim is not just to gain intellectual understanding, for that limits the depth and breadth of our experience. Rather, this approach invites

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<sup>2</sup>Janice L. Seymour, "From Product-Centered Teaching to Student-Centered Teaching through the Understanding of the Effect of the Protestant Ethic on Art Education," (Master's Thesis Chapman College, 1974.)

us to explore with as many of our faculties as possible in order to expand and deepen our experience and understanding. Hopefully this approach will also help us to expand our skills at seeing in the prophetic spirit.

The Growth/Sharing model includes the opportunity to experience Scripture or, in this case, the prophetic statements of Flannery O'Connor from several perspectives. First, it provides cognitive information about the materials used as a basis for the study. In this case the understanding of Walter Brueggeman's and Flannery O'Connor's background, their purpose, and the concepts and understandings put forth in their works. It also introduces and illustrates through the materials, new insights and concepts to be analyzed, evaluated and discussed.

Discussion of this type of cognitive material is only a small part of this model, however. This cognitive level, upon which most of us function most of the time, speaks to only part of us. Seeing in the prophetic spirit as discussed by Brueggemann and expressed and practiced by O'Connor is a holistic process. It must include an understanding that encompasses the affective part of our selves that feels, is intuitive, is imaginative, and is expressive, as well as the cognitive part of us that gathers, analyzes and processes information.

In our culture today many of us are not trained in being imaginative and creative, and are unable to visualize Scripture, the message of the prophets, or the hope of new life. As a result our understanding tends to be abstract and cognitive, rather than personal and concrete. Imagination, visualization and imaging help us to express and experience our longings and hopes for the coming of the Kingdom of God into our lives and our world more clearly, more personally and more concretely. Therefore, this model includes opportunities to learn and/or improve the prophetic tools and skills of visualizing, imaging, imagining and expression. A variety of opportunities will be provided in order to engage in this dialogue using as many of our senses and faculties as possible.

This model will also provide a much needed opportunity to reflect our experience of the work itself and the discussion of background material. So often we are presented with information and new concepts, but no opportunity to fully get in touch with our own feelings, reactions, insights and inspirations. Guided imagery will be used with two purposes in mind. First to teach a centering/mediation process that we may use for a variety of purposes in our lives. And second, to help us practice imaging and imagining.

Since for many of us words are not always the most expressive, we will also have the opportunity to use a variety

of media and skills such as music, poetry, painting, drawing, dance or whatever is the most expressive for each of us in order to dialogue with the work, and/or the questions, feelings and ideas it evokes in us.

Once this process of reflection is completed we will have the opportunity to share them with the others in the group. Most of us have never learned to share. We are accustomed to discussing. These are two very different processes. Discussion is really a means of exchanging and processing information. Information is the center of the process.

Sharing is a more holistic process of encountering another person in depth. Sharing is person-centered. It is both a process that involves skills in active listening, and in expressing and sharing feelings rather than just factual information.

This process recognizes that each of us is a wondrous and rare gift made up of feelings that only we feel in just a certain way, knowledge and ideas, skills, gifts and talents that only we have. It is this combination of feelings, experience, knowledge, skills and talents that make us unique--one of a kind. And because we are one of a kind, only we can share this unique gift of who we are, what we can do, what we think, and, most important, how we feel. Through sharing we take the risk to trust, to take down our defensive barriers and give to others this gift, the gift of ourselves--

our hopes, our dreams, our sadness and frustrations, our struggles and our joys.

Because our feelings cut through many layers to the heart of who we really are, the sharing process requires the building of trust. This is a process in which we open ourselves to one another and make ourselves vulnerable. Therefore each of us must be sensitive and aware of one another. God must be at the center of this sharing process. When God is at the center we are able to let go of our self-centered need to express our needs and feelings, and dialogue with the others in the group. Each person has a chance to share and each a chance to listen. Only by truly listening can we hear with the prophets ear.

The nature of the sharing process demands that we build trust between one another. There are a few guidelines that will teach us how to listen, and are easy to learn. This kind of active listening and sharing is a skill that each of us should cultivate for two reasons. First, this is a key skill required of a prophet, for a prophet hears to the heart of things. In order to do this the prophet must set aside his/her own feelings, ideas, opinions and beliefs, and listen with an open and compassionate mind. Second, active listening is a skill that enables us to reach out to others in pain, or grief, or who are ill or dying, in a positive way, that we cannot do if we are more concerned about our own ideas, feelings, and beliefs.

There are three ways in which we communicate:

- 1.) Mouth to mouth communication is talking without thought or feeling.

An example of this is the comment we make to someone we know as we pass them on the street like, "Hi, how are you? Is it hot enough for you today?" We don't really expect an answer from them.

- 2.) Head to head communication is talking about what we think or know.

In other words, it is factual kinds of information. Some examples are:

- discussing a math problem;
- telling someone why you think that a particular political candidate should be elected;
- or, describing what you do or where you live.

- 3.) Heart to heart communication is expressing how we feel.

For example, how you feel about your family; how much you care about them; how you feel when you see them after a long absence.

Sharing is heart to heart communication for it is our heart that allows us to trust, and to take a risk. It is our head that says, "I may be embarrassed if I share what I really feel so I need to protect myself", or "I have been hurt in the past so I must hide my true feelings". It is our head that

builds the safe walls of the cocoon around us so that our true feelings are hidden and safe from hurt. But as we learn to share and learn to trust more and more we discover that it is through taking risks that we are able to experience the best gifts of this life. It is only by trusting and risking that we learn who we really are--who God intended us to be.

God has sent to us a gift in each person that we meet. And these gifts come in many different shapes, sizes and wrappings. Some come brightly wrapped but are really quite ordinary when we see inside; some come as precious gems wrapped in simple brown paper; others have been handled roughly and come to us battered and damaged; some are loosely wrapped and easy to open, others are wrapped quite tightly and need help from others in order to be opened; and, some of these gifts do not know or cannot accept that they have precious gems inside--they don't yet know that every gift that God makes is precious.

Each gift is different...for some sharing comes naturally and easily, however those that have been mishandled or discarded in the past may have to struggle for the strength and courage to speak their hearts voice. Just their desire and struggle to be able to share is a precious gift. When we listen with the ear of our heart we create a safe place where

can trust and share without fear of being laughed at, put down, rejected or thrown away.

Learning to share is a skill just like learning to drive a car or to play tennis. Here are some guidelines to help us to be more aware and sensitive. There are three basic rules to sharing:

1) Speak your hearts voice and listen with your hearts ear.

When sharing from the heart remember:

- Feelings are neither good or bad nor right nor wrong, they just are. It's o.k. and natural to be nervous, don't try to hide it -- be open and honest with your feelings.
- Don't put yourself or others down.
- Share only your own experience not what happened to someone else.
- Make only "I feel" statements not "I think ..." or "I feel that ..." statements. Feeling statements can be made in just three words "I feel happy".
- Take your time, don't rush.
- Don't hide your feelings behind words like people, we, us and you that generalize.
- Don't ask for advice.

2) Accept the gift that is offered just as it is. Accept-

ance is essential if we are to be able to trust, and to risk to share. To show your acceptance:

- Make eye contact with the person sharing.
- Listen carefully to everything that is said.

- Avoid the following:
  - Negative body language such as yawning, shuffling feet, sitting outside the circle, facial expressions that say "I'm bored" or "Oh, brother!" etc.
  - Commenting on the sharing
  - Interrupting and questioning.
  - Giving advice or preaching
  - Problem solving
  - Interrupting the silence
  - Statements like, "Oh you shouldn't feel that way" or "That happened to me and you'll get over it in time."

All of these, no matter how well intended, say to the person sharing that they are being judged, that they are not o.k. or acceptable just the way they are and/or just the way they feel at that moment.

3) And, finally, every sharing is sacred and confidential.

Nothing shared should leave the room.

This sharing process is a team process. In it each person takes responsibility for teaching and learning. This sharing process deepens insights and feelings; enables us to see from new perspectives; and, enables us to experience a deepening growth in Christian community.

Finally, the Growth/Sharing model provides an opportunity to formulate a response. So often when we reach the end of a study we have been given a lot of new knowledge, but we do not take the time to thoughtfully consider what impact this new knowledge or understanding could or should make in

a real and concrete way in our lives. The Growth/Sharing model provides an opportunity to make a conscious, intentional resolve to affirm what we are doing in our lives, or to resolve to change and move in new directions.

### Define the Process of the Study.

#### Textbooks and Materials:

Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination.  
Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.

#### Resources: (Optional)

Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971.

Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. By Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.

Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. by Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979.

Chapter 2 of this paper - "A Prophetic Model of Ministry".

Chapter 3 of this paper - "Flannery O'Connor - An Introduction to Her and Her Work".

### Outline of the Process:

The following is a suggested outline for a session. The sessions are planned for two hours to allow plenty of time. The sessions may be lengthened or the number of sessions increased if desired.

- A. Centering - Preparation for the experience (10 min.) This is a closed-eye process. It is usually a guided meditation,

designed to relax the participants, help them set aside distractions from the day, and/or help them strip away preconceived ideas, feelings, and prejudices and thus focus their attention more fully on the experience. This teaches a tool for use in personal spiritual life, as well as providing practice in visualizing.

If the leader chooses to design his/her own meditations, consideration should be given to including a relaxation exercise in the beginning; involving as many of the senses as possible in the experiential process; and designing the exercise in such a way as not to be so directive that it intrudes on the participants right to choose. They should be open-ended so that the participant can somewhat design the exercise to his/her own experience and needs.

Guided meditations can be very powerful, and can bring emotions to the surface. If this should happen the leader should be prepared to spend the time to work through them, being supportive and helping the group to be supportive without smothering.

B. First reading of the passage (2-5 mins.) If discussion centers around shorter passages it is desirable to read them through in order to focus discussion. Materials should be read at home first. Participants should be encouraged to read them aloud to someone else or hear someone else read them aloud. Hearing the words read

aloud brings passages alive with details and nuances otherwise missed. Thus bringing new dimension to the work.

If desired the study sessions could be increased to allow time to read them aloud. If this is done the material might be read, the background material presented, and discussion done leaving time for personal reflection and response to take place between sessions. Sharing concerning this reflection could take place at the next session. However, one session is desirable.

As the participants sit relaxed, focused and with eyes closed at the end of the meditation, ask them to be an objective bystander as the passage is read. It should be read by a good story teller who can bring the passage to life.

C. Teaching of the background material (20 mins.)

1. A brief presentation of information is given about the materials, the writer, suggested concepts, etc.
2. Some personal reflections of the presenter may be presented using a variety of mediums if desired.
3. Discussion of ideas, concepts and insights.

D. Second reading of the passage (2-5 mins.) (Optional).

This time as the passage is read the participants again sit with eyes closed in a relaxed position and are asked to visualize the scene as though they are there including

sights, sounds, smells, etc., and imagine that they are one of the key figures in the passage.

- E. Personal Reflection (15-30 mins.) This is a time of silence when the participants reflect on their experience, feelings and reaction to the passage and express this on paper. They may wish to use drawing, music, poetry, or other mediums during this process.
- F. Sharing Reflections (20 mins.) If the group is small, sharing can take place in the whole group. If, however, the group is more than 10-12, small groups of 6 to 8 should be formed. This is a time of sharing experience and feelings not a discussion. Therefore, the first time around the group the rules for sharing should be strictly observed. Each person should have the opportunity to share their experience with the passage and the feelings and insights it aroused.
- G. Formulating a Response to the Passage (5 mins.) The participants are given silent reflective time to formulate on paper how they wish to respond to their encounter with the passage. This could be kept in the form of a diary, Letters to God, or through the use of a variety of media.
- H. Open Sharing (10 mins.) (Optional) If time permits those who wish may share with the whole group how they wish to respond to the passage. It is possible that the participants might choose to plan a group response as well.

- I. Closing Meditation or Prayer (5-10 mins.) The closing experience may be a closed-eye guided meditation, and/or a prayer designed to help summarize and internalize the experience, offer hope, strength and courage to carry out resolves, and give thanks for the insights, shared experiences and the possibility of new life that has been offered through the experience.

## SESSION I

AN INTRODUCTION TO BRUEGGEMAN, O'CONNOR AND A  
PROPHETIC MODEL OF MINISTRY

## Reading Assignment:

Chapter 2 - "A Prophetic Model of Ministry"

Chapter 3 - "Flannery O'Connor - An Introduction to Her  
and Her Work."

Walter Brueggeman's Prophetic Imagination (optional)

A. Centering - Preparation for the experience (10 min.).

Sit up straight in a chair in an open body position (legs uncrossed, hands resting on your thighs with palms up in a position ready to receive a gift). Close your eyes ... take a deep breath and hold it ... now release it. Take another deep breath ... release it. Now, as you breathe feel the air filling your lungs like the breath of God bringing life to your body. As you continue to breathe imagine the life-giving air flowing into the rest of your body ... first to your toes ... your feet ... your calves ... your thighs ... feel it in your fingers ... your hands ... your arms ... your shoulders ... feel your chest rise and fall ... feel your back with each breath ... feel the air throughout your torso ... breathe into your neck and head where tension seems to build up. Now

imagine yourself bound together in wholeness by this life-giving air.

Now, scan your body with your consciousness and see if you can find your center ... a spot of spiritual quiet ... a place where it is silent and calm and where you seem to come together ... a "still-point". This calmness and unity that you feel in your center can be thought of as God's presence within you. Now, without creating something that isn't there, stop thinking, and see if you can really feel that God is in this place within you ... see if you can let this peace that brings objectivity, and new sight flow out from your center all through you ... into every cell just as your blood picks up the life-giving oxygen and takes it to every cell of your body ... picture it as it flows through you ... into every cell of your body.

Now, take your time and begin to come back in touch with this place, and when you are ready open your eyes.

Note: The first thing that we need to do to really spend some time in seeing from God's point of view is to stop the world, so to speak. In other words, stop the arguments and discussions that take place in our heads, and really tune in to God. We must do all that we can to open ourselves to new sight and new visions. This experience is one way that we

can do this, and it can be done any time and in any place. Through it we can come in touch with the center of our being where we find God.

This can be used as a model for other relaxation exercises in the sessions to follow.

B. First reading of the passage (2-5 mins.). The leader should select parts to be read. Since this is teaching material and not a literary work it is not necessary to follow the general instructions designed to help the visualization process in this session.

C. Teaching of the background material (20 mins.).

1. Introduction:

- a. Give a summary of the purpose of the study and describe the process.
- b. Explain the Group/Sharing Model and the rules for sharing.
- c. Suggest that each participant keep a journal of ideas, reflections and responses.

2. The Lesson:

The leader presents the basic points here.

Discussion Questions:

- a. Where or how do you see what Brueggeman describes as the "dominant culture" today? Where and/or

how does it imprison God? What concepts keep us stuck in the "dominant culture"?

- b. Where or how do you see the "alternative consciousness", or, in other words, the dynamic edge of possibility, justice and hope to be nurtured today?
- c. What kind of a person was Moses? How does our idealization compare with the evidence of Moses' humanness?
- d. Who are the prophets of today and/or recent years? How are their messages expressed?
- e. How can we be prophetic? How can we develop new ways of seeing? How can we keep the "ministry of imagination" alive?

D. Second Reading of the Passage (2-5 mins.) (Optional).

Eliminate this step and use this time for discussion or personal reflection.

E. Personal Reflection (15-30 mins.). Divide the time equally

Between these two parts;

- 1. Experiments in "Seeing": Every person started this life with an artist at his or her center, however schooling, training and conditioning often causes the artist within to atrophy. In addition, our everyday, non-creative environment overloads us

with so many things to "see" and respond to that in order to survive our defense mechanisms begin to tune out many things. We begin to look or glance rather than to really "see". The arts can help us to develop the "seeing" skills that enable us to "see" in new and clearer ways. Here are some experiments to try:

- a. Everything in this world is a gift to us from God if we only choose to see it that way. Every object has something to share with us and we can tune into it. Here is a meditation to help you to experience this. You will need a pencil and a blank sheet of paper.
  - 1) Choose an object from nature.
  - 2) Take a few moments to relax yourself. You may use the relaxation process you learned in the opening meditation.
  - 3) Now, without analyzing or thinking about the process, simply let the object capture you -- become absorbed in it as you begin to draw it.
  - 4) Be aware of sound, vibrations of color, light and shadow, movement, rhythm, texture, smell.
  - 5) Try to peel back the layers gently without damaging it. Look for depth.

- 6) Try to penetrate the mystery and the spirit of God in it.
  - 7) When you have finished say good-bye to the object.
- b. Go for a walk.
- 1) Try to see the grand scheme, the panoramic view.
  - 2) Unfocus your eyes as you walk and see what you see.
  - 3) Concentrate on one square foot of ground for a time and see what you see.
  - 4) Focus on an object as an Eskimo artist would. We normally take a material and make something out of it. The Eskimo studies the object to find the essence or spirit within it and then helps it emerge.
- c. Sit in a comfortable position. Relax yourself and then simply close your eyes and listen. Record in your journal what you hear and experience.
- d. Experiential trust walk in teams. Choose a partner and alternate leading each other blindfolded. The leader should lead his/her partner to various objects and places in order to experience them

by touch, smell, hearing. Be sure to hold the blindfolded person firmly and lead them carefully. Do not talk.

These experiments can also be done at home.

2. Personal reflection (15-30 mins.). During this time each person should reflect on the discussion questions, especially question #5. The focus should be a personal one. Thoughts should be kept in the journal. Various mediums such as drawing, poetry, images may be used.
- F. Sharing reflections (20 mins.). The group should be reminded of the rules for sharing.
- G. Formulating a response to the passage (5 mins.). This can be done in a number of ways. One tool that could be used is a letter to God.
- H. Open Sharing (10 mins.) (Optional).
- I. Closing Meditation (5-10 mins.). Sit in a relaxed position with your eyes closed. Breathe slowly and deeply ... Relax with each breath.

Now, picture a beautiful place where you feel at peace ... safe ... where you are able to see things clearly and objectively ... Try to get in touch with God's time ... God's rhythm ... How does it feel? ... God has

called you to "see" in new ways ... God has given you the gift of sight ... God has given you ways to express your visions ... God calls you to become a prophet in your own unique way. What is that way? Visualize yourself being a prophet ... it can be painful ... it can be frightening. If you feel this ask Christ to be with you ... Ask Christ to give you courage to see ... Ask Christ to help you be the prophet you are called to be. When you are ready express your thanks and love to Christ and return to this place and open your eyes.

## SESSION II

## CHARACTER STUDIES: A WINDOW/MIRROR OF HUMANNESS

## Reading Assignment:

Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation" pages 488  
to 509 in The Complete Stories.

Matthew 25:31-46

A. Centering - Preparation for the experience (10 min.).

Today we meet Flannery O'Connor through her retelling of Jesus' story about the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46). It is a story of the Day of Judgment. In order to meet her and really hear her retelling of the story, let us take a moment to free our minds and bodies from our tiredness, our frustration, our self-centeredness and our preconceptions.

To help us do this sit up straight in your chair in a relaxed position with your eyes closed, feet flat on the floor, and hands resting on your thighs. Now take a deep breath ... hold it ... and slowly release it ... Repeat this two or three more times and as you release the breath let go of any tension you feel ... Be aware of your body relaxed and at peace.

Now, visualize yourself in that safe place where you go for quiet and solitude ... that place where you meet Christ ... that place where you are able to see clearly and objectively ... that place where you need not fear the new, the challenging, because Christ is there helping you to understand and to deal with the new ideas and new feelings ... As you stand there before Christ, one by one, find those things that will keep you from hearing his word through Flannery O'Connor ... your tiredness ... your frustrations ... your apprehension of what you might see or hear ... your need to always feel comfortable ... your need to have things come out the way you think they should ... your self-centeredness. Now, take each one of these and hand it to Christ to hold for you ... if you want them back later he will return them ... Now, bring Christ with you and return to this place and open your eyes.

- B. First reading of the passage (20 mins.). Read aloud the short story "Revelation". Eliminate the second reading and use the time here. Read Matthew 25:31-46.
- C. Teaching of the background material (20 mins.).

Jesus in his stories and parables shocked his listeners. Unfortunately, because we have heard the stories so many times they have become comfortable to

us, and because some of the things Jesus uses for illustrations are not familiar to us in our culture, we often fail to see the shocking realities that he presented to us. Flannery O'Connor brings back to us the often shocking reality of Jesus' stories. She has the gift of taking our everyday experiences, stripping off all the polish and veneer that we use to "domesticate" them and make them comfortable, and then she presents them to us in their simple and terrifyingly honest reality. Terrifying because as we see ourselves standing before her mirror in all our nakedness we realize how helpless we are, how dependent we are on God's grace. She has done this in "Revelation", her retelling of the Last Judgment as first told by Jesus in Matthew 25.

Ms. O'Connor was a people-watcher. She found the characters for her stories in her everyday travels. "Revelation" was one of her favorite stories. She wrote in a letter to Cecil Dawkins,

'Revelation' was my reward for setting in the doctor's office. Mrs. Turpin I found in there last fall. Mary Grace I found in my head <sup>3</sup>doubtless as a result of reading too much theology.

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<sup>3</sup> Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 579.

We are able to get the flavor of how her mind worked as we listen to her descriptions of the people that she met in the doctor's office and in the hospital. In two letters written to 'A', a friend, she says,

Yesterday we went to the doctor's office -- same scene as in 'Revelation' but nobody in there but us and two old countrymen -- about 6 ft. tall & skin and bones in overalls. They just had a talk. The first one said, 'Six months from now this here room will be half full of niggers' . . . 'Aw,' says the other one, 'it ain't the niggers so much. It's them high officials. Jest take the money away from them high officials & you won't have no trouble. All it is is money'.

And in another written from the hospital she says,

One of my nurses was a dead ringer for Mrs. Turpin. Her Claud was named Otis. She told me all the time about what a good nurse she was. Her favorite grammatical construction was 'it were.' She said she treated everybody alike whether it were a person with money or a black nigger. She told me all about the low life in Wilkinson County. I seldom know in any given circumstances whether the Lord is giving me a reward or a punishment. She didn't know she was funny and it was agony to laugh and I reckon she increased my pain about 100%

O'Connor presents her characters simply and economically, and yet expresses their very essence. She writes about them as an integral part of the environment in which they live. Robert Fitzgerald, speaking of "Revelation" said,

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<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 571.

<sup>5</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 569.

One of its excellences is to present through a chance collection in a doctor's waiting room a picture of a whole 'section' -- realized, that is, in the human beings who compose it, each marvelously and irreducibly what he or she is.<sup>6</sup>

Flannery O'Connor's characters are most important for it is through them that her stories grab us, capture us, and then propel and pull us through them. They capture us and sometimes threaten us because O'Connor takes people she has met, sees them in their total realness and expresses them so simply, honestly, clearly and concretely that we cannot fail to see ourselves reflected in them with our virtues stripped away to expose our vices and our helplessness to change them without God's graceful action. As Fitzgerald said,

In her work we are shown that vices are fathered by our impudent crimes, and that neither fear nor courage saves us (we are saved by grace, if at all, though courage may dispose us toward grace).

Ruby Turpin in "Revelation", is a large, outgoing Southern woman who takes pride in the fact that she is a small landowner, she is a religious woman, she has a

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<sup>6</sup> Flannery O'Connor, Everything that Rises Must Converge (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956), p. xxxiii.

<sup>7</sup> O'Connor, Everything, p. xxx.

strong sense of right, wrong and decency, and that "She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent."<sup>8</sup> And yet we get another view of her almost immediately. Once we follow Mrs. Turpin into the doctor's office, are seated and size up the others in the office, we begin to realize that she is not as comfortable as she would have others and herself believe. This is evidenced by her need to almost immediately begin to reassure herself by rehearsing in her mind all the reasons why she is a good person, and why she is thankful to Jesus for making her who she is. That is, better than others, better than the others in the waiting room that she is comparing herself with. Just as she reassured herself with who she might have been if she couldn't be herself, she also occupies herself by naming the classes of people. For her,

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them -- not above, just away from -- were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of

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<sup>8</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1946), p. 497. Permission to quote this source granted by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well . . . Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.

Her feelings and judgments come through as she talks to a pleasant woman, mother of Mary Grace who is reading a book called Human Development. Mrs. Turpin and the pleasant lady exchange comments and knowing glances that said, "You had to have certain things before you could know certain things."<sup>10</sup> But little by little Mrs. Turpin becomes aware that Mary Grace dislikes her. Finally, Mary Grace makes a terrible, hateful face at her. "It was the ugliest face Mrs. Turpin had ever seen anyone make and for a moment she was certain that the girl had made it at her. She was looking at her as if she had known and disliked her all her life -- all of Mrs. Turpin's life, it seemed too, not just all the girl's life."<sup>11</sup> Then, Mrs. Turpin thinks,

. . . If Jesus had said, "You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelt-like, but you can't be a good woman with it," she would have had to say, "Well don't make me that then. Make me a good woman and it don't matter what else,

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<sup>9</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 491

<sup>10</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 494.

<sup>11</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 495.

how fat or how ugly or how poor!" Her heart rose. He had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you, thank you, thank you!<sup>12</sup>

Then, just as she was again thanking Jesus, the book Human Development hits her over her eye, and Mary Grace tries to strangle her. Then Mrs. Turpin thought,

There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. 'What you got to say to me?' she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation. Mrs. Turpin sensed that Mary Grace was an instrument of grace. Mary Grace's reply was 'Go back to Hell where you came from you old wart hog.'<sup>13</sup>

Mrs. Turpin was stunned not so much from the physical attack as from the judgment made on her. She was already aware of the beginning workings of grace in the event even though she did not yet fully know the message.

She lay down once she got home and began thinking.

. . . the image of a razor backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears snorted into her head. She moaned, a low quiet moan.

"I am not," she said tearfully, "a wart hog. From hell." But the denial had no force. The girls' eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been over-looked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-

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<sup>12</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 497.

<sup>13</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 500.

working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath.<sup>14</sup>

She had realized that she had been singled out for a message but she still didn't quite "see" and she was angry. She could not even put up the happy, virtuous facade with the hired niggers that day. She waited until Claud left to take the hired niggers home and she was alone. She absent-mindedly was hosing down the hog parlor as she began to argue with God saying, "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" . . . "Why me?" she rumbled. "It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church."<sup>15</sup>

In the meantime, the setting sun is described as "very red, looking over the paling of trees like a farmer inspecting his own hogs." And then as it began to get dark "everything took on a mysterious hue" and the pasture was described as "growing a peculiar glassy green". This description suggests transparency and rebirth, like a window on some transformation to come. The highway had become a streak of lavender suggesting a royal path or path of penitence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 502.

<sup>15</sup> O'Connor, Complete, pp. 506-7.

<sup>16</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 507.

Mrs. Turpin began to shout at God. "'Go on,' she yelled, 'call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!'" She was challenging the challenge made to her order of things just as the righteous and the unrighteous in "The Sheep and the Goats" story questioned their sentence. The answer to her challenge was a garbled echo. Then, "A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, ' Who do you think you are?'"

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood.<sup>17</sup>

The echo answers her question and her challenge with "Who do you think you are?"

This is the question that is put to us through Mrs. Turpin and Through Jesus' story. "Who do you think you are?" "If you truly love God who is your brother?" "What is God's order of things?" "Where do you fit in God's order of things?" Mrs. Turpin receives the answer, the revelation, through a vision as she stared across the field.

There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw

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<sup>17</sup> O'Connor, Complete, pp. 507-8.

the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away...<sup>18</sup>

Before when Mrs. Turpin visualized the order of things her dream ended as "all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven."<sup>19</sup> Now, in her vision, the top rung is on the bottom and the bottom is on the top, and even her virtues are being burned away. There is a new order of things. Ms. O'Connor says to Maryat Lee in a letter,

Sure you're right. She (Ruby Turpin in 'Revelation') gets the vision. Wouldn't have been any point in that story if she hadn't. I like Mrs. Turpin as well as Mary Grace. You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hogpen. She's a country female Jacob.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 508.

<sup>19</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 492.

<sup>20</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 577.

Ruby Turpin has been given the gift of sight. As she walks back to the house, ". . . the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah."<sup>21</sup> She was given the gift of sight just as we are given the gift of sight through reading this story and/or Jesus' story about "The Sheep and the Goats". She, and we, stand on the edge of decision. We can choose to close our eyes and ears and stay where we are, comfortable and secure in our ignorance; we can choose to go back the way we came; or we can recognize our helplessness, accept God's grace, take the "lion's leap", and step off the edge into the new order.

Note: At this point, if others have some specific observations about symbolism, etc. they may be encouraged to share it. However, this should be brief and confined to specific points related to the story rather than develop into a discussion about interpretations and feelings about it. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for this.

D. Second Reading of the Passage (2-5 mins.). Eliminate this and use the time to read the story aloud.

E. Personal Reflection (15-30 mins.).

We are now about to take a few moments to reflect on what we have learned, experience and felt. Here are

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<sup>21</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 509.

some questions to guide your reflections:

- Did you feel any differently after hearing "Revelation" than you did after hearing Jesus' story of "The Sheep and the Goats?"
- How do the characters in "Revelation" make you feel?
- I find parts of myself reflected in many of O'Connors characters (Mrs. Turpin, Mary Grace, her mother, etc.). Do you see yourself in any of O'Connor's characters?
- Where are you in Mrs. Turpin's order of things?
- Where are you in the end vision?
- What are your virtues that are being burned away? or perhaps, need to be burned away?
- How have you deodorized and veneered and distorted the truth?

Use whatever method or medium you choose. Use your journal.

F. Sharing reflections (20 mins.).

Briefly review the rules for sharing.

G. Formulating a response to the passage (5 mins.).

Now that we have reflected on the passage, shared our reflections and insights and benefitted from the insights of others, what changes do we wish to make or what qualities about ourselves do we wish to reinforce?

Enter your response in your journal.

A "Letter to God" format might be useful.

H. Open Sharing (10 mins.) (Optional). If time permits, the participants may share their response with the whole group.

I. Closing Meditation (5-10 mins.)

Let us close with a brief meditation. Again, sit in a relaxed position with your eyes closed . . . Breathe slowly and deeply . . . with each deep breath feel your body relax more . . . and more . . . and more . . . Feel your body at peace.

Now, visualize yourself in your favorite place of quiet, solitude and safety . . . the place where you are able to see things clearly and objectively . . . that place where you meet Jesus . . . Ask Jesus to come . . . ask him to guide you . . . ask him to help you.

Flannery O'Connor says, " . . . to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" . . . Jesus is there to help you . . . Ask him to help you strip away those things that cause scales to form on your eyes so that you cannot see . . . Ask him to show you those virtues you pride yourself on that separate you from God and his creation . . . those feelings of superiority that keep you from being close to your family . . . to your friends . . . to your neighbors in need . . . to your God; those things that you control so well that they keep you from seeing your helplessness before God . . . your friends . . . your family . . . your colleagues . . . your time . . . your feelings . . . your

grief . . . your joy . . . those feelings of goodness, piety, and giving that placate or impress others . . . make others feel small . . . or indebted to you. Ask Jesus to be your mirror . . . Ask him to make your vision clear.

Now, ask Jesus to help you to begin to live centered in God . . . ask him to remain with you and to draw with large and startling pictures in order to help you do what you resolved to do to change your life . . . Now thank Jesus for his help and support . . . say good-bye . . . and slowly return to this place.

## SESSION III

DRAWING LARGE AND STARTLING PICTURES:  
THE GROTESQUE AND FREAKISH

## Reading Assignment:

In Chapter III - Flannery O'Connor - An Introduction to Her and Her Work, the selection entitled "The Tools of Violence, the Grotesque and the Freak"

The short story "You Can't Be Any Poorer than Dead"  
pp. 292-310 in The Complete Stories.

Optional reading: Flannery O'Connor's novel The Violent Bear It Away.

A. Centering - Preparation for the Experience (10 mins.).

Let us begin by preparing ourselves to hear and to see and to feel with open and objective minds and hearts. To help us do that, sit up straight in your chair in a relaxed position with your eyes closed, feet flat on the floor, and hands resting on your thighs. Now take a deep breath . . . hold it . . . and slowly release it . . . Repeat this two or three times and as you release the breath let go of any tension you feel . . . Be aware of your body relaxed and at peace.

Now that your body is relaxed begin to get in touch with all of the things that would cause you to be

distracted, closeminded or apprehensive. . . One by one, imagine yourself picking up and holding in your hand each of the things that might distract you . . . the hectic day . . . the need to know exactly what is going to happen next . . . the need to always have the right answer . . . the preconceived ideas about what is right and how things ought to be . . . whatever might cloud your vision . . . whatever might keep you from "seeing".

Once you have all of these distractions in your hands feel them . . . get to know them for what they are . . . Now close your hands tightly around them and imagine yourself hanging onto them as tightly as you can . . . How does it feel to hang onto them? . . . Be aware that one side of each of us tells us to hang on, to be safe, to protect ourselves . . . what we don't know won't hurt us.

Now, as you sit hanging onto these distractions get in touch with the side of you that came to learn and grow . . . Have that side reassure the side hanging on, and convince that side to slowly let go of each of these things one by one and let them float away . . . As you do, let your hands open until they rest at peace on your thighs with the palms up in a position ready to receive all that God has to give you.

When you are ready return to this place and open your eyes.

B. First reading of the passage (15-20 mins.). Read aloud the short story "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead", pages 292-310 in The Complete Stories. Eliminate the second reading and use the time here.

C. Teaching of the background material (20 mins.).

1. Sum up the sections in Chapter III entitled "Telling the Truth" and "The Look of Violence, the Grotesque, and the Freak".
2. Discuss Flannery O'Connor's short story "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead". (This story was eventually revised and rewritten as the first chapter in her novel The Violent Bear It Away. Therefore, it would be helpful for the leader to read both in order to gain a more indepth understanding of the characters.)

By the standards and experience of much of American society today, the characters in this story certainly would be perceived as having elements of the grotesque or the freakish. In actuality, our lives are filled with these kinds of characters. However, we human beings tend to close our eyes and pretend that we do not see, or that we do not know. Flannery O'Connor simply portrays those characters in our everyday lives with brutal honesty in words that image them indelibly so that we cannot ignore or forget.

We tend to avoid truth and honesty. O'Connor confronts, even shocks us with the truth. She spells it out by exaggerating it in her characters and in their actions. Because the truth comes from the least likely source we are shocked and forced to wrestle with it.

In this story there are several questions to ask ourselves. First of all, which character is really the so-called freak -- the so-called crazy one? Where does the truth lie? Is it Tarwater's great-uncle, the self-styled prophet (see The Violent Bear It Away) who taught him not only the 3 R's but

... history beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment.<sup>22</sup>

The one viewed as crazy by the school teacher nephew and the strangers voice in Tarwater's consciousness. Or is it in the atheist school teacher nephew whose cold, empirical and logical approach seem to kill the great-uncle's very soul (see The Violent Bear It Away)? Is it the voice that denies the teachings of the great-uncle? The voice that encourages Tarwater to drink the stuff that feels like the devil's arm reaching inside him (p. 306) and calls it the

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<sup>22</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 292.

Lord's blessing (p. 307)? Or is it the salesman who claims that love is the only policy, and that you cannot sell to someone you do not love. And, therefore, keeps a record book with the ailments of his customers and their families in order to remember to inquire about them; and is relieved when they die because it is one less to remember.

A second set of questions revolve around images and themes O'Connor weaves throughout the story. Images that give clues about truth. Images such as:

- a. The eyes and the appearance of the great-uncle and the school teacher's retarded child who resembles the old man. (See pages 294, 298, 302, 390.)
- b. The themes of the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment. (See pages: 292, 297, 299, 303, 304, 307.)
- c. The theme of redemption. (See pages: 293, 304, 306.)
- d. The image of bread used to describe old Tarwater. (See pages: 296, 298.)
- e. The cross. (See pages: 296, 297, 299, 303, 396.)  
Used to describe young Tarwater. (See pages: 295, 308.)

- f. The reference to liturgical colors throughout. Especially the color purple that suggests advent.
  - g. The tomb image. (See pages: 305, 307.)
  - h. The image of fire. (See pages: 297, 299 in regard to the school teacher: 303, 309 Tarwater and the burning of the corpse: 309 lightning fires and woods: 310 Tarwater mistakes the city lights for the fire, and raises the question of, "What is the right direction?".
- D. Second Reading of the Passage (2-5 mins.). Use this time to read the story aloud.
- E. Personal Reflection (15-30 mins.). Use whatever method or medium you choose to explore these questions designed to guide your reflections. Use your journal.
- a. How would you describe the main characters? What view of life do they seem to live out?
  - b. How did you react or respond to the characters in the story? Are they freakish, grotesque, or disturbing to you? Why or why not?
  - c. How did you react or respond to them as prophets?
  - d. Where have you encountered these prophets in your own life? How did you react to them? Why?
- F. Sharing reflections (20 mins.). Observe the rules for sharing.

G. Formulating a Response to the Passage (5 mins.). Entries using various mediums may be made in your journal. Questions for reflection:

1. Has your vision changed or not changed? Why or why not?
2. How will you affirm your old vision or implement your new vision?

H. Open Sharing (10 mins.). (Optional).

I. Closing Meditation (5-10 mins.).

Sit in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Focus on the rhythm of your breathing. Try to put aside the thoughts and feelings going on inside you and relax.

Be aware that the Good News is awe-full ... wonder-full ... outrageous ... Be aware that it often comes to us in strange, mysterious, and even weird ways ... Be aware that that can challenge who we are ... even challenge our whole view of life ... The world can become a strange, unfamiliar place.

Be aware that this can be frightening ... Be aware that our natural response is often to avoid or deny the prophets ... deny the truth ... deny the Good News. Deny them out of fear. Fear of change ... fear of the new ... fear of not being able to live up to the new vision ... fear of becoming the whole, creative, aware persons we were created to be.

Be aware that the Holy Spirit is with us ... the Holy Spirit experiences these feelings with us ... the Holy Spirit agonizes with us ... the Holy Sprriit empowers us to open our eyes and see the overwhelming, awful, wonderful, outrageous truth of the Good News ... Know that the Holy Spirit empowers us to become the image of God we were created to be.

And now, offer thanks to God for the gift of life ... the gift of vision ... and the gift of the Holy Spirit. When you are ready return to this place and open your eyes.

## SESSION IV

## VIOLENCE AND THE MOMENT OF GRACE

Reading Assignment:

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" pages 117-133 in The Complete Stories.

A. Centering - Preparation for the experience (10 mins.).

Find a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Begin to breathe slowly and deeply ... Feel each breath as it enters your body and fills your lungs ... Imagine each time you inhale that you are filled with the Holy Spirit ... Imagine that each time you exhale the tensions and the toxins leave your body ... Continue this process until your body and your spirit are at peace.

Now, visualize a favorite place where you go to find peace ... where you go to think ... where you feel safe ... where you can be completely honest ... Where you can face anything. What are you sitting on? ... What textures can you feel? ... what sounds do you hear? ... What smells do you smell?

Take some time to drink in the peace and the confidence that that place brings you ... Feel yourself being filled up ... When you are ready bring the peace and confi-

dence and objectivity of that place back to this room and open your eyes.

B. First reading of the Passage (15-20 mins.). Read aloud the short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find", pages 117 to 133 in The Complete Stories. Eliminate the second reading and use the time here.

C. Teaching of the background material (20 mins.).

1. Review the material in the section in Chapter III entitled "The Tools of Violence, the Grotesque, and the Freak".
2. Discuss the story.

"She would of been a good woman," the Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."<sup>23</sup>

These words of the Misfit sum up the point of this session.

This is a session and a story about grace. Grace is the gift of unconditional love that God givesto us. It is an on-going gift. It is given despite the fact that we human beings continue to separate ourselves from God. It is not something that we can earn, but can only be claimed through faith in the crucified and risen Christ.

The main character in this story is the grandmother. She is like thousands of grandmothers everywhere.

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<sup>23</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 132.

She has built, as a fortress around her, her own dream world which enables her to sleepwalk through life. She is a person who always needs to be in control, and who controls through the use of all kinds of manipulative games. Her approach to life is the epitome of triviality.

In a letter to John Hawkes, Flannery O'Connor makes this statement about the story:

Perhaps it is a difference in theology, or difference that ingrained theology makes in the sensibility. Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical. Cutting yourself off from Grace is a very decided matter, requiring a real choice, act of will, and affecting the very ground of the soul. The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering. His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgment: she would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life. True enough. In the Protestant view, I think Grace and nature don't have much to do with each other. The old lady, because of her hypocrisy and humanness and banality couldn't be a medium for Grace. In the sense that I see things the other way, I'm a Catholic writer.<sup>24</sup>

Here are some questions for the leader to ask him or herself in preparation. These can also be used to guide the discussion.

- a. How does Flannery O'Connor create the character of the grandmother?

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<sup>24</sup> O'Connor, Habit, pp. 389-90.

- b. How does the grandmother control, manipulate and trivialize life? What is the result?
- c. Flannery O'Connor found the element of the comedic in the grandmother. Do you? Where?
- d. How would you describe the various family members? How do they react to and deal with the events, especially those at the end of the story? Do you see evidence of the "dominate culture" at work in their behavior?
- e. The grandmother has been described as a witch and pure evil by some, and a means of grace by others.<sup>25</sup> How do you see her? Why?
- f. How do the grandmother and the Misfit view religion or faith?
- g. What are the elements of shock and violence in the story? How do they work? How do they make you feel?
- h. The Misfit says,  

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead." The Misfit continued, "and He shouldn't have done it. He has thrown everything off balance. If he did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can -- by killing somebody or burning down

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<sup>25</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. 389.

his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness," he said and his voice became almost a snarl.<sup>26</sup>

What does this story have to say about grace, hope and the nature of being human?

- D. Second Reading of the Passage (2-5 mins.). Use this time to read the story aloud.
- E. Personal Reflection (15-30 mins.). Use whatever method or medium you choose to explore these questions designed to guide your reflections. Use your journal.
  - a. Do you see any of the behavior patterns of the family in the story in yourself, your family, friends, church, profession, etc.?
  - b. How do you try to control and manipulate? How do you trivialize life?
  - c. Have you experienced moments of grace in your life in unlikely and unexpected ways?
  - d. How do you avoid experiencing these moments of grace? When has the gun been put to your head and opened your eyes to grace?
- F. Sharing reflections (20 mins.). (Optional).

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<sup>26</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 132.

G. Formulating a Response to the Passage (5 mins.). Entries using various mediums may be made in your journal. Questions for reflection:

- a. Has your vision changed or not changed? Why or why not?
- b. How will you affirm your old vision or implement your new vision?

H. Open Sharing (10 mins.). (Optional).

I. Closing Meditation (5-10 mins.).

Sit comfortably in your chair ... close your eyes ... begin to focus on your breathing ... relax. With each breath imagine the Holy Spirit stirring within you ... stirring your depths ... filling you with the strength to confront the truth ... filling you with a new kind of sight that allows you to face the painful, shocking reality of the truth ... fills you with the strength to recognize the truth wherever it is found ... fills you with the courage to see it, feel it, know it ... fills you with the strength to live with the feeling of imbalance that Jesus the Christ brings ... fills you with the strength to live with the uncertainty of what will be.

Envision the transforming power of the Holy Spirit flowing through you bringing new sight, new healing, new life.

Spend some time envisioning yourself becoming the person you feel called to become with the help of the Holy Spirit. When you are ready bring your renewed being back to this room.

## SESSION V

## THE HOPEFULNESS OF THE COMIC AND THE TRAGIC

## Reading Assignment:

"Good Country People" pages 271-291 in The Complete Stories.

Review "Flannery O'Connor as Prophet" in Chapter III.

Especially focus on the topic of the nature of the parable.

A. Centering - Preparation for the Experience (10 mins.).

Sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed ... Breathe slowly and deeply ... with each breath feel your body relax ... continue to breathe deeply ... begin to scan your body for those places where tension remains ... When you find a tense area focus there for a moment and see if you can will it to relax.

Now visualize that place where you feel confident ... safe ... at peace ... That place where you meet Christ ... See what surrounds you ... feel the surface you are sitting on ... hear the sounds ... smell the smells.

As you sit there you see a figure in the distance ... as it approaches you realize that this person is

dressed as a clown ... As it comes closer you realize that the clown is coming to bring you a gift ... a gift for you! ... As the clown approaches feel the expectation ... feel the excitement ... Prepare yourself to receive this gift during this session ... It may not be what you expect ... it may lead you to unexpected places ... just be ready to receive it ...

Now, bring this feeling of expectation with you as you return to this place and open your eyes.

B. First reading of the passage (15-20 mins.).

Read the short story "Good Country People" aloud. Eliminate the second reading and use the time here.

C. Teaching of Background Material (20 mins.).

1. Discuss the material in the section in Chapter III entitled "Flannery O'Connor as Prophet". Focus on the parabolic nature of her work.
2. Discuss the nature of comedy and tragedy in relationship to O'Connor's work.

Walter Brueggeman sees the rôle of the prophet as a threefold process of criticizing, energizing and doxology. Flannery O'Connor criticizes. She "sees" and reflects what she "sees" down to the worst of it. Through the use of various literary tools such as violence, the freakish, the grotesque, the unexpected and the use of the comedic, she presents us with symbols

she has mined from our memories that reflect our reality to us in new ways. Brueggeman refers to this use of language that exposes despair and hopelessness, and brings us to the edge of conversion as the "language of amazement".

It is this coming to the edge of conversion where we confront the reality of God. It is the place where we stand in the midst of reality and are driven more deeply into it. We are empowered to see the world from a perspective of greater truthfulness and depth. Brueggeman calls this doxology.

The comic element is one of the tools through which Flannery O'Connor empowers us to see in greater depth and confront the reality of God. She uses it to expose evil and shape it in such a way that we can face it and "see" the folly of our human strivings -- our human attempts to wield power, manipulate and fragment, in order to control our lives, our world and even imprison God in the temple of our own construction. Therefore, let us explore the nature of the comedic, especially in relationship to the tragic.

The comic writer must be able to see people and society in their true light. He must have a clear vision that values humanity, and uses compassion in creating characters that, despite their limitations and

idiosyncracies, have dignity and worth. Through his characters he tries to cope with the day to day, minute to minute realities of living.<sup>27</sup>

The comic writer's vantage point is from inside society. From that vantage point he depicts and reflects to the people how society influences the creation and distortion of character.<sup>28</sup> Philosopher Suzanne Langer describes the nature of comedy in this way:

...Destiny in the guise of Fortune is the fabric of comedy; it is developed by comic action, which is the upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium, his contest with the world and his triumph by wit, luck, personal power, or even humorous, or ironical, or philosophical acceptance of mischance.<sup>29</sup>

She sees comedy as the pure sense of the vital rhythm of life. Its chief concern is the preservation of this life.<sup>30</sup>

True comedy is a powerful weapon against the dominant culture. Through thoughtful laughter the narrowness or lack of vision, the frivolous approach to life, the devaluation of human dignity and worth,

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<sup>27</sup> Eric Bentley, from "The Life of Drama", in Comedy: A Critical Anthology, ed. by Robert W. Corrigan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 767.

<sup>28</sup> George Meredith, from "An Essay In Comedy," in Comedy: A Critical Anthology, ed. by Robert W. Corrigan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 744.

<sup>29</sup> Suzanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 331.

<sup>30</sup> Langer, Feeling, p. 351.

and the misery, hopelessness and despair that often come with affluence and power are reflected to society for what they are. Through the power of the comedic element we are able to confront our shortcomings, see them for what they are, and laugh at them. Therefore, comedy can not only be an advocate for the "alternative consciousness" whose enemy is misery, hopelessness and despair, but also an instrument of conversion. Wylie Sypher speaks of Kierkegaard's view of comedy. He said,

Kierkegaard's highest comedy is the comedy of faith; since the religious man is the one who knows by his very existence that there is an endless, yawning difference between God and man, and yet he has the infinite, obsessive passion to devote himself to God, who is all, whereas man is nothing. Without God man does not exist; thus "the more thoroughly and substantially a human being exists, the more he will discover the comical".<sup>31</sup>

True comedy is a step toward faith and away from hopelessness and despair.

While Langer sees the thrust of comedy as the preservation of life, she sees the thrust of tragedy in terms of self consumption and movement toward an absolute of final close.<sup>32</sup> In tragedy the protagonist, caught up

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<sup>31</sup> Wylie Sypher, from "The Meanings of Comedy," in Comedy Critical Anthology, ed. by Robert W. Corrigan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), p. 759.

<sup>32</sup> Langer, Feeling, P. 331

in the action he initiates, grows and matures to his limit and spends himself in the process.<sup>33</sup> She says,

Tragedy dramatizes human life as potentiality and fulfillment. Its virtual future, or Destiny, is therefore quite different from that created in comedy. Comic Destiny is Fortune -- what the world will bring and the man will take or miss, encounter or escape; tragic Destiny is what the man brings,<sup>34</sup> and the world will demand of him. That is his Fate.

Eric Bentley says of comedy and tragedy,

Both tragedy and comedy are about human weakness, but both, in the end, testify to human strength. In tragedy one is glad to be identified with a hero, whatever his flaw or his fate. In comedy, even if one cannot identify oneself with anybody on stage, one has<sup>35</sup> a hero to identify with, nonetheless: The author.

Both comedy and tragedy bring us to the edge of conversion.

Flannery O'Connor uses the comedic as an important tool in bringing the characters and/or the readers to the edge of conversion. Often she uses a blending of comedic and tragic elements.

In the story "Good Country People", the comedic element is present as Flannery O'Connor creates the characters and sets the scene. The reason the characters are so funny is because they are just like so many people

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<sup>33</sup> Langer, Feeling, p. 357.

<sup>34</sup> Langer, Feeling, p. 352.

<sup>35</sup> Bentley, p. 768.

we know, and the situations are funny because they are situations just like ones we all seem to find ourselves involved in. The difference is that she gives us the distance and perspective to see the people and situations that are such intimate parts of our lives in more objective ways. She exaggerates and caricatures just enough that she mirrors to us, in non-threatening ways, our own failings and says to us, "Now you see. Will you change before it is too late?"

In "Good Country People", Flannery O'Connor uses elements of the comedic and the tragic along with contrast and reversal in order to help us "see". She always has fun in her stories playing with names and this one is no exception. As a matter of fact, naming and labeling become pivot points upon which contrast and the comedic focus.

Take for example the characters themselves. Mrs. Freeman, the tenant woman on Mrs. Hopewell's farm. Mrs. Hopewell describes her as a "lady" and "good country people". She would never admit she was wrong, and she knew everybody's business. And she " . . . had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults on children. Of diseases, she

preferred the lingering or incurable.<sup>36</sup> And then there is Mrs. Hopewell, who prides herself on being a woman of great patience, her inability to be rude to anyone, and her perception of people. She accomplished this through her philosophy that is summed up in her favorite phrases, "that's life", "other people have their opinion too", and "nothing is perfect".<sup>37</sup> She ". . . had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack."<sup>38</sup> And finally, there is Joy Hulga, Mrs. Hopewell's recluse daughter who hides behind a Phd. in Philosophy, a heart condition (double meaning intended), and a wooden leg; and, who had ". . . the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it."<sup>39</sup>

O'Connor creates tension and contrast between what one might call "two sides of the same coin" through the characters, and also through such contrasting images as the Bible salesman and Hulga the athiest: "good country people" and the Phd. in Philosophy; Hulga and Joy; and even the saccharin Joy and the Joy of possibility.

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<sup>36</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 275.

<sup>37</sup> O'Connor, Complete, pp. 272-73.

<sup>38</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 272.

<sup>39</sup> O'Connor, Complete, p. 272.

In the end the tension of the contrasts, and the contradictions or reversals that result, brings Hulga/Joy to the limit of the character Hulga she plays; and, through her, O'Connor brings us to the edge of an old life and the possibility of a new one.

### 3. Discussion.

Here are some questions for consideration and discussion:

- a. How is the comic element developed in the characters? What images, puns and plays on words does O'Connor use?
- b. What reversals do you find in the story? What contrasts? What tensions?
- c. Do you see the 'dominant culture' at work in the character? How?
- d. How does O'Connor bring Hulga to the edge of conversion? What role does the wooden leg play in it?

D. Second Reading of the Passage (2-5 mins.). Use this time to read the story aloud.

E. Personal Reflection (15-30 mins.).

Use whatever method or medium you choose to explore these questions designed to guide your reflections. Use your journal.

1. Do you see yourself in any of the characters? How?  
How does the drama of your life reflect patterns of  
the comic or the tragic?
2. What does this say about where you fit into the  
"dominant culture".
3. Flannery O'Connor brings Hulga to the edge of con-  
version. Do you find yourself there? How? How do  
you feel?

F. Sharing Reflections (20 mins.). Observe the rules of  
sharing.

G. Formulating a Response to the Passage (5 mins.).

Entries using various mediums may be made in your journal.

Questions for reflection:

- a. Has your vision changed or not changed?
- b. How will you affirm your old vision or implement your  
new vision?

H. Open Sharing (10 mins.) (Optional).

Sit in a comfortable position. Close your eyes.  
Focus on the rhythm of your breathing. With each breath  
relax ... let go of the thoughts and feelings that you  
are hanging onto for a few moments ...

Now, get in touch with those hopeless places in  
your life ... Those places where you would like to be  
different.

Now return to the place where you first saw the clown ... he is still there ... coming closer ... he is standing before you now ... You realize he is the Christ ... the comedian who grasps the hope life presents even in the darkest ... most frustrating ... most hopeless situations ... He is that clown that juggles ... that tightrope walks ... and transforms ... He grasps the moment ... He stands there with you on the edge of eternity ...

He offers you a gift ... Accept it. What is it? ... How does it make you feel? ... Thank him in whatever way you wish ... Say goodbye.

When you are ready return to this room.

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## SESSION VI

## THE BREAD OF LIFE: THE CALL TO PROPHETIC MINISTRY

## Reading Assignment:

Pages 21 and 22 in The Violent Bear It Away.

"An Introductory Discussion of Several Images of Prophet"  
in Chapter II - A Prophetic Model of Ministry.

A. Centering - Preparation for the Experience (10 mins.).

Today is a day of endings and new beginnings.  
Let us spend some time preparing ourselves. Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes . . . Take a deep breath . . . hold it . . . release it slowly. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply . . . With each breath visualize yourself as you let go of the thoughts . . . distractions . . . frustrations . . . of the day . . . Feel yourself relaxing with each breath . . . Feel at peace.

Begin to scan your body with your awareness until you find that place that is your center . . . that place where the essence of your being resides . . . Experience that essence . . . What is the shape of it? . . . What kind of energy does it have? . . . What does it feel like? . . . Can you image or visualize the qualities that make you

who you are? ... Can you name them? ... Spend some time simply getting in touch with that center place ... Explore it ... Become familiar with it ... Make friends with it. When you are ready, bring your awareness back to this place with you and open your eyes.

B. First reading of the passage (2-3 mins.).

Read the following quote from The Violent Bear It Away:

"Jesus is the bread of life," the old man said.

The boy, disconcerted, would look off into the distance over the dark blue treeline where the world stretched out, hidden and at its ease. In the darkest, most private part of his soul hanging upsidedown like a sleeping bat, was the certain undeniable knowledge that he was not hungry for the bread of life. Had the bush flamed for Moses, the sun stood still for Joshua, the lions turned aside before Daniel only to prophesy the bread of life? Jesus? He felt a terrible disappointment in that conclusion, a dread that it was true. The old man said that as soon as he died, he would hasten to the banks of the Lake of Galilee to eat the loaves and fishes that the Lord had multiplied.

"Forever?" the horrified boy asked.

"Forever," the old man said.

The boy sensed that this was the heart of his great uncle's madness, this hunger, and what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be passed down, might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him and then he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life.

He tried when possible to pass over these thoughts, to keep his vision located on an even level, to see no more than what was in front of his face and to let his eyes stop at the surface of that. It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something -- a spade, a hoe, the mule's hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow under him -- that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. He did all he could to avoid this threatened

intimacy of creation. When the Lord's call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshly hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beast.<sup>40</sup>

C. Teaching of the background material (15 mins.).

1. The focus of this session is centered on the concept that a prophet is not someone with special and specific skills, but is someone whose whole life reflects the prophetic spirit. It is a life-style. Keep this in mind as you review some of the commonly held images of prophet. These are mentioned in the section entitled "An Introductory Discussion Several Images of Prophet" in Chapter II. Invite the participants to add their own images.

Try to direct the discussion so that the group volunteers the concept of prophecy as a life-style. You may want to choose a prophet or two that are significant to you as illustrations in order to facilitate this process.

2. Discuss Flannery O'Connor and the "habit of being".

Flannery O'Connor said of herself:

You are right that I won't ever be able entirely to understand my own work or even my own motivations. It is first of all a gift, but

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<sup>40</sup> Flannery O'Connor, The Violent Bear It Away (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1960), pp. 212-2. Permission to quote this source granted by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

the direction it has taken has been because of the Church in me or the effect of the Church's teaching, not because of a personal perception or love of God. For you to think this would be possible because of your ignorance of me; for me to think it would be sinful in a high degree. I am not a mystic and I do not lead a holy life. Not that I can claim any interesting or pleasurable sins (my sense of the devil is strong) but I know all about the garden variety, pride, gluttony, envy and sloth, and what is more to the point, my virtues are as timid as my vices. I think sin occasionally brings one closer to God, but not habitual sin and not this petty kind that blocks every small good. A working knowledge of the devil can be very well had from resisting him.

However, the individual in the Church is, no matter how worthless himself, a part of the Body of Christ and a participator in the Redemption. There is no blueprint that the Church gives for understanding this. It is a matter of faith and the Church can force no one to believe it. When I ask myself how I know I believe, I have no satisfactory answer at all, no assurance at all, no feeling at all. I can only say with Peter, Lord I believe, help my unbelief. And all I can say about my love of God, is, Lord help me in my lack of it.<sup>41</sup>

Sally Fitzgerald said of her:

Flannery consciously sought to attain to the habit of art, and did, by customary exercise and use, acquire it in the making of her novels and stories. Less deliberately perhaps, and only in the course of living in accordance with her formative beliefs, as she consciously and profoundly wished to do, she acquired as well, I think, a second distinguished habit, which I have called "the habit of being": an excellence not only of

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O'Connor, Habit, p. 92.

action but of interior disposition and activity that increasingly reflected the object, the being, which specified it, and<sup>42</sup> was itself reflected in what she did and said.

3. Explain the after the second reading of the passage there will be 30 to 45 minutes allowed for personal reflection. It will be guided by the reading for today and the statements by and about Flannery O'Connor which give us clues to what it means to be human beings before God, and, what it means to live a prophetic life. The passages and the questions that will follow are simply to be used as guides if desired.

D. Second Reading of the Passage (2-3 mins.).

Ask the participants to sit with eyes closed. As the passage is read, ask them to visualize the scene as though they were there including sights, sounds, smells, movements etc. You may set the scene before you begin. Ask them to imagine that they are Tarwater, and that they see through his eyes.

1. In the reading for today there are several images associated with the concept of prophet: emptiness, hunger, madness, intimacy with creation, bread of life. How would you interpret these? Do you find these to be valid for you? How do you find them expressed in your own life?

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<sup>42</sup> O'Connor, Habit, p. xvii.

2. What does "the bread of life" mean to you? How is it expressed in your own life? Is there a private part of your soul where you are not hungry for the bread of life? This seemed true for Flannery O'Connor. How did she deal with it? How did Tarwater? How do you?
3. How did Tarwater avoid the call? How do you?
4. Review your journal. What patterns, insights, ideas, resolves, etc., have developed for you over the last few weeks?
5. How do you envision your call to the prophetic life-style? How is it expressed in your life now? How, and in what directions would you like it to grow? How will you go about moving in these directions?

Use your journal.

E. Sharing Reflections (20-30 mins.). Observe the rules of sharing.

F. Closing.

A. Share Holy Communion together.

B. Close the service with this meditation:

Ask everyone to join hands in a circle around the Communion Table.

Close your eyes. Take a deep breath ...  
exhale slowly (repeat two to three times).

Now think of someone that you love ... someone that you love with the deep self-giving, unconditional, Christ-love that is beyond understanding ... that kind of love that is the essence of the bread of life ... As you visualize that person, feel the transforming warmth, peace and sense of wholeness and well-being that comes with this depth of love ... Feel the bread of life ... that love ... as it fills your center ... Now feel it begin to grow and expand ... Feel it as it fills your chest ... feel it as it fills every limb ... every muscle ... every cell.

Now, send that love ... that energy of the bread of life ... through your right hand to the person next to you ... visualize it as it fills that person ... see it as it flows on around the circle filling each person with its energy ... Feel the energy flow ... feel the energy grow as it links each member of the circle together.

Now, begin to send that energy of the bread of life out to friends ... family ... church members ... Send it out to every corner of this country ... Visualize it as it moves out across the face of the earth ... see it as it fills every living being ...

see it as it makes its way to the center of pain ...  
war ... hunger ... persecution ... every kind of  
suffering and human indignity.

See the energy of love, the bread of life,  
expanding and exploding until it cannot be contained  
... See it as it travels out of this world and into  
new ones across the universe. Continue to feel this  
energy of the bread of life that fills up every hungry  
place ... When you are ready, bring it back to this  
place with you.

## CHAPTER 5

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this project was to provide a process through which people of faith, both clergy and laity, could begin to explore a prophetic model of ministry based on the work of Walter Brueggemann and Flannery O'Connor. Its intent was to offer this prophetic model of ministry in order that it might begin to address the tendency toward fragmentation and powerlessness of the traditional model of ministry. It in no way expected to present a solution to the problems, rather, it presents a process which is holistic and provides an opportunity to explore an alternative approach. It was designed to provide a variety of opportunities to discover and develop skills of "seeing" and expressing that empower people to more fully become the Church. By virtue of the fact that the process is holistic in nature, it builds a more unified, team approach to ministry as opposed to the fragmentation that tends to take place in the traditional mode.

The frustration of such a study series is that time is limited and the wealth of possibility found in Flannery O'Connors' work is inestimable. Each topic, and each short story discussed, contained enough material for reflection to require several sessions.

But this study was not primarily interested in presenting, discussing and learning information. Instead, it presents a process through which the skills and tools of the prophetic life-style might be explored and deepened. Thus, through the use of this process design, persons may create new sessions for exploration.

It is hoped that Flannery O'Connor becomes a good friend and mentor to those who participate. It is hoped that through her, they too may experience and deepen that "habit of being" that was for her

...an excellence not only of action but of interior disposition and activity that increasingly reflected the object, the being, which specified, it, and was itself reflected in what she did and said.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. xvii.

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